

STAR WARS

TWILIGHT OF THE JEDI
THE LONG NIGHT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After writing my *Sword of the Jedi* trilogy, I had a yen to go tie up some more loose ends left behind when Disney abandoned the old canon. I enjoyed a lot of the EU dealing with the Clone Wars and the Dark Times and wanted to see an end to some of those uncompleted story arcs. Hence, *Twilight of the Jedi*. The first book, *The Dying Day*, completes the *Republic/Imperial Commando* series left unfinished after Karen Traviss quit writing Star Wars. The second, *The Long Night*, finishes Michael Reaves' *Coruscant Nights* series. A third storyline, starring former Jedi Master and future Sith Lord A'Sharad Hett, spans the two, so in the end you can think of it as a loose duology where each book is mostly self-contained.

The four books in Michael Reaves' *Coruscant Nights* series form a pretty complete arc overall, but I wanted to bring the story of Jax Pavan, cynical journalist Dhen Dur, and loyal sentient droid I-5YQ to a full conclusion. I also wanted to get inside Darth Vader's head, which Reaves' novels never did; to portray the Empire as a sad sack of corruption and backstabbing; and finally to bring Anakin Skywalker back to Naboo and end the prequel era stories where they began.

As a final mention, I've noticed that a lot of the EU stories dealing with the Dark Times, well, aren't totally dark. It's fair enough that lots of writers like their characters and don't want to have them offed by the Empire, but the end result is a list of Jedi purge survivors so long you wonder what Vader & co were doing for 20 years. This is not that type of story. You've been warned.

A long time ago in a galaxy far,
far away....

PROLOGUE: Nightfall

They kept the prisoner waiting for a long time. At first he sat upright in his chair, alert, ready for someone to come through the door and sit down on the opposite side of the interrogation table. When no one did, he began to tap his fingers on the tabletop until he found a rhythm. When that got boring he stuck both hands in his trouser pockets and started to slump lazily, inching further and further down the seat of his chair. They'd taken him in while the sun was going down and he was started to get tired.

When the door finally opened he didn't jerk to attention. He just stayed there, insouciantly slumped, and watched a figure step into the room.

He hadn't been expecting anything specific, but he was still surprised. The being who sat down across the table wasn't even wearing a police uniform. Of course, that could have meant he was a plainclothes detective, but he didn't really *look* like a plainclothes detective either.

It wasn't just his species (though short, wide-faced, black-eyed Sullustan officers were generally a rarity, even on the Coruscant police force). He didn't carry himself like a detective. He was old and he hobbled with one bad leg propped by a silver cane. He didn't turn those big black eyes on the prisoner. He almost seemed scared to look at him.

The prisoner was curious. He tried not to show it.

The Sullustan looked at the tabletop. He absently stroked his gray beard with one hand. He drew in a deep breath, sighed it out, and finally looked up.

"You're probably wondering why you're here," the Sullustan said.

The prisoner was, but he tried not to show that either. He shrugged and said, "I figure it has to do with a case I've been working on. I didn't expect to be treated like a suspect, though."

The Sullustan folded his stubby-fingered hands on the tabletop. "A case?"

"I keep busy. There's always people who need help."

"So you're a private investigator?"

"You could call it that. I do a lot of odd jobs."

"Legal ones?"

"I'm as law-abiding as you are, detective. You are a detective, right?"

"How long have you been doing 'odd jobs'?"

The prisoner whistled. "A very long time."

"On Coruscant? Or other places?"

"Mostly Coruscant."

"But other places too?"

"A little. But this planet's my home."

"How long has it been your home?"

The prisoner frowned. He hated it when people pried into his background. "What kind of interrogation line is this? Aren't you supposed to be asking me about who I know or where I was last night?"

"I'm just... curious." The Sullustan looked like there was a whole lot more he wanted to say, but he didn't, and for a second the prisoner wondered who was supposed to be interrogating whom.

The prisoner sat a little more upright in his chair and said, "I've been here since the Empire was around. Since *before* the Empire, even."

"How old are you?"

"How old are *you*?"

"I've spent enough time around humans to get a sense of how they age. I'd say you're around fifty standard years."

"I'm not as young as I used to be," the prisoner admitted, scratching the gray around his temples. There seemed to be more of it every time he looked in the mirror.

"None of us are." The Sullustan's wide mouth flexed in what looked a little like a smile.

"I don't know about Sullustan aging, so don't ask me to guess."

"I wasn't going to. But I'm curious. Have you spent much time around Sullustans? Have you ever known any, personally?"

The prisoner frowned. More prying. He hated that. "I've known a lot of people. On Coruscant, you meet just about every kind."

"That's true." The little smile wilted. "So no close Sullustan friends?"

"Honestly, the kind of work I do, I don't make many friends."

The Sullustan looked disappointed. "It doesn't have to be that way."

"It's easier. Safer." He crossed his arms over his chest and tried to sound firm. "So, are you going to tell me why you people brought me in here? Those deputies didn't say anything. I don't like being kept in the dark."

"This might take a while."

"Well, apparently I'm not going anywhere."

The Sullustan stared at him, just stared. He had no idea how to handle that. Those big black eyes were so... inhuman. It felt like they were staring all the way into his soul, or whatever he had that passed for one.

Finally, the Sullustan asked, "Have you ever heard of a human named Jax Pavan?"

The prisoner thought for a moment. "I think he runs a speeder rental by Windlash Alley."

The Sullustan sighed. "There's a lot of Jax Pavans, aren't there?"

"It's a pretty common name, especially for humans."

"I know. My name's Den Dhur, in case you were wondering. It's pretty common on Sullust."

"So you're talking about a *different* Jax Pavan."

"I knew this Jax Pavan a long time ago. He was a Jedi."

It took the prisoner a moment to process that. Every-body knew that the Jedi Order had been hunted down and nearly exterminated by the Empire, just like everybody knew that now Luke Skywalker was starting it up again at the old Rebellion base on Yavin 4.

The prisoner asked. "*How* long ago?"

"Thirty years, give or take," said the Sullustan.

"And why do you expect me to remember one specific Jax Pavan from thirty years ago?"

"I just told you. He was a Jedi Knight. They tend to be memorable."

He hesitated a second before responding. He didn't understand any of this but he felt like he should. The Sullustan looked at him intently.

"I didn't know a Jedi named Jax Pavan," the prisoner insisted. Even as he said it, something inside him doubted.

The Sullustan exhaled. "Okay. In that case, I'd better tell you a story. And it's going to be a long one."

"You brought me in here just to tell me a story?"

"It looks like I did."

The prisoner shifted on his hard chair. "Got anything more comfortable, then?"

"Sorry."

"Okay. We'll see if the butt-cramps jog my memory."

He tried to sound flippant, but something inside him, some weird strand of memory, was telling him he *should* remember this Jedi, and he had no idea why. He hated that uncertainty. It was why he didn't dwell on his past; there were too many things lost in shadows.

The Sullustan hesitated before responding. Sullustan faces weren't easy to read, but he could still sense a deep sadness coming from the being across the table.

"This Jax Pavan, he was your friend, right?"

The Sullustan nodded.

"And if he was a Jedi thirty years ago, it probably means he's dead. Right?"

The Sullustan didn't move, not an inch.

"I'm sorry," the prisoner said honestly.

"I can't tell you everything that happened," the Sullustan began, as if he hadn't heard him. "I can only tell you my part in Jax Pavan's story, however small. Someone has to tell it, and there's nobody else left..."

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PART I: Coruscant
A Handful of Nothing

1

"I've got to admit; I didn't like Jax when I first met him. I thought he was a little arrogant, a little aloof, and way too righteous for anyone's safety. Mostly, though, I was jealous of how my best friend kept running after him like a sickly loyal puppy. I know it's petty, but, well, you only have one best friend. Somehow, though, he dragged me into his permanent orbit. I was hardly the only one. He just had a way with people."

It was a long way up, but it was a long way down too. Jax Pavan tried to keep that in mind as he pulled his speeder up against the docking platform. As he pushed himself out the driver's seat he looked over the edge and saw the black chasm of Imperial Center's underworld falling into infinity below. When he looked up, the chasms turned to infinite bright towers stabbing upward at a starless night.

It was a dizzying sight, but he'd known and loved it all his life. Even with the name change the new government had rammed through, Coruscant was still home sweet home.

Jax hopped off the speeder and waited for his partner to disembark. When she did, he turned to the hovering valet droid and tossed it his keys.

"Take care of it, will you?" He said.

"Of course, sir."

The little droid gave a little creaky bow, then jumped on a short burst of repulsor energy and nestled into the driver's seat Jax had just vacated. He waited and watched as the droid worked the controls with its thin, overlong arms, and a moment later his speeder was racing off.

"It will be all right," his partner said.

"You think the droid's trustworthy? In a place like this?"

"I trust Sacha," Magash Drashi said simply.

The Zabrak woman was only a month out of Dathomir, experiencing the scale and frenzy of Coruscant for the first time in her life, and she still limited herself to terse statements and careful sentences that betrayed none of the anxiety and wonder Jax could feel bleeding off her in the Force, though she was getting better at hiding that too.

They walked toward the doorway ahead. A pair of very unfriendly-looking Trandoshan bouncers flanked either side of the Diamond Star's entryway but Jax and Magash didn't break their stride. They were both dressed in casual black trousers, tunics, and jackets totally appropriate for an establishment where Imperial City's fashionable night-life met its criminal edge.

One of the Trandoshans growled at them and barred their way. He held up a black electric paddle in one hand and ran it up and down their flanks.

"Don't worry, we've got no weapons," Jax told them honestly.

When the Trandoshan's scanner agreed, he growled against and let them pass into the Diamond Star. The Star was a combination bar, nightclub, casino, and something else too, though most beings who frequented this place didn't know it.

They skirted around the edge of the broad dance floor. Jax had never been in the Diamond Star before but he'd gotten a run-down of its design. He led Magash into the rear-center room, where tables were laid out across the red-tiled floor and a long curving bar-counter hugged the back wall. As he and Magash sat down at an empty table- one of the few- he scanned the barstools until he found who he was looking for. There was only one pale, squat, bald Sullustan and he was sitting at the very end stool, as promised.

"Den's in position," Jax said quietly as he sat down opposite Magash.

The Zabrak woman looked around the nightclub with a steady eye and bland expression, but Jax could tell this was too much for her. This place currently contained about three times as many people as her entire village on Dathomir.

"Can you sense him over there?" Jax asked. He certainly could, but he'd been with Den Dhur for almost two years now and his unique Force-aura cocktail of world-weary cynicism and beleaguered morality was easy for him to pick up, even in a crowd.

For Magash, it was harder. She said, "I can see him. He's over your shoulder, at the end of the bar."

"I know. But can you *feel* Den? You know what he feels like in the Force by now."

Magash blew out a sharp breath. "It's easier when we are alone. There are... too many people here."

"Try. Please."

She closed her eyes. He saw her lips move slightly; he'd been trying to wean her off the Dathomiri habit of uttering spells whenever she wanted to use the Force, even for something as simple as this. He understood that Magash's people had a very different history from the Jedi and a different way of accessing the Force, but he'd brought Magash with him back to Coruscant with the intent of teaching her what *he* knew.

Besides, having to shout verse every time you summoned the Force was really, really impractical.

He watched Magash carefully. Eventually she stopped muttering but her eyes remained closed. Her breathing was steady and natural, just like he'd taught her. Her back was stiff. Even with her eyes closed, in deep concentration, she looked ready to jump into battle.

In some ways, Magash reminded him of Laranth, though he didn't like to dwell on that. Both women were trained warriors, students of Force traditions very different from the Jedi's, usually over-serious, always focused on the task at hand. The difference was that Laranth had been his lover and Magash was his student. The

difference was that Laranth was dead and Magash was alive and he had to keep his eye on the future. It was the only way to honor Laranth, his Master, and all the others who were gone.

Magash's eyes popped open. She said, "I'm sorry. I wasn't able to succeed."

"It's all right, really," Jax told her, though in truth he was a little disappointed. "He's very hard to spot, even if you know him. This place is way too crowded."

"Indeed." Magash's upper lip curled upward. "Was it necessary to come to an entertainment zone at peak entertainment hour?"

"Actually, yes. We're trying not to be noticed, remember?"

Magash looked around. "If we don't want to stand out we should order something to drink. Everyone else has."

"Good idea. I'll handle that." Jax held up one hand and whistled.

A passing Zeltron waitress sauntered over, rested an empty tray against one cocked hip, and asked their pleasure. Jax ordered a Bidalian Sunrise for himself and something decidedly less strong for Magash. The Zeltron smiled and sauntered back to the bar.

Magash watched her saunter. Jax chuckled and said, "Something interesting?"

"It is strange, seeing a female servant," Magash muttered. One of the many, many differences between her homeworld and Coruscant was that Dathomir had a strictly matriarchal society where men could not learn the Force or own property.

"She is a servant, but she seems commanding," Magash continued. "She draws the attention of almost every male she passes, like a fish on a hooked line."

"Well, that's a *different* kind of authority..."

"Even you looked."

"I did *not*. I just- nevermind." Jax waved both hands. "Listen, we're here for something more important."

"I would hope so."

Without tilting his head far back, Jax glanced at the catwalks running overhead. "From what Den's said, Kral Kolvus is going to leave his office in fifteen standard minutes for a meeting in the Mid-Levels. Then we'll have our opening"

"And *how* did Den Dhur learn that?"

"Sullustans have good hearing, especially Den. Plus he's made himself into a bit of a regular here."

"Like Swiftbird and your droid."

Jax rankled a little at someone calling I-Five 'his' droid, when I-Five clearly owned himself. Magash had only heard about droids on Dathomir and I-5YQ was a big stretch from what she'd been told.

"The point is," Jax said, "When the opening comes, we get into the penthouse, get the package, and get out fast."

Before Magash could say anything else, the Zelton waitress came back and deposited two drinks along with a winning smile and a suggestive wink. Jax passed her a small tip- finances were tight right now- and let her saunter off again.

Magash made a face when she tried her drink. Dathomir wasn't big on distilled beverages either, though they had all other sorts of weird chems the witches there used for their Force-fueled 'magic.'

Jax sipped his drink, hunched over as though talking to Magash, and casually ran a hand along the right side of his face. His finger tapped the audio transceiver tucked into his ear, hidden from view by thick brown hair that he'd let grow out longer than ever before.

He didn't need to talk; he was just sending a signal, letting everyone know things were in place. He started talking to Magash in low tones, telling her about what she was drinking, while his eyes darted left and right, trying to spot I-Five. He tried to sense the droid with the Force, too, though I-Five's dim, improbable, and still-mysterious Force-aura was hard to pick up in this crowd.

In the end it was I-Five who found him. Since their visit to Toprowa, I-Five had found a way to swap his memory core into different droid chasses. Right now he was dressed as unobtrusive as possible: his white-domed astromech body rolled past Jax's table. A wide tray was fitted to the top of the droid like a hat, and a trio of shimmering violet cocktails balanced on it.

The droid whistled as he passed Jax, but I-Five's distinctive voice came in over the comlink.

"Please get this over with soon. I can't take much more humiliation."

Jax smirked and said nothing as I-Five kept rolling to whatever table needed drinks. He watched as the astro-mech rolled up to a booth with three Falleen females in slinky silver dresses. They scooped up the cocktails and didn't bother to thank the server or even pass him a tip.

Poor droid. I-Five turned around and whirred back to the bar for his next thankless task.

"Jax," Magash said in a whisper, "Is that Kolvus?"

Jax looked carefully upward. Walking along the catwalk was one big, furry, black-and-white ZeHethbra dressed in a smart gray suit. A Nikto and a Trandoshan, also wearing tailored suits and looking as polished and posh as their species could get, followed behind him. He nodded as he carefully watched them walk away from the back offices toward the front entrance, where a speeder was probably waiting to pick up the most powerful Black Sun Vigo on Coruscant.

"He's hard to miss," Magash muttered.

"It's time." Jax tapped his earpiece twice, then finished off his drink into fast gulps. By the time he was done his head was starting to swim a little, despite the anti-intoxicant pills he and Magash had both taken before coming here.

As he set his glass down he looked around for I-Five. The droid suddenly popped up from behind. He had a couple more drinks balanced on his tray and he made an indignant tooting sound as he stopped beside Jax.

Jax and Magash both knew what to do. They let one hand each drift under the table and held palms open. A hatch on I-Five's chassis slipped open. Dax tugged gently with the Force and pulled his lightsaber into his hand. Magash likewise retrieved the retractable plaststeel sparring staff she'd taken to using. When they both had their weapons secreted on-person, I-Five gave one more toot and began rolling toward the back wall.

"Okay," Jax said under his breath, "Let's do it."

Magash and Jax picked up their glasses and started walking toward the bar, like they wanted to order more drinks. I-Five took a different path in the same direction. Den Dhur was still at the bar, not looking at either of them, just nursing his drink.

I-Five kept rolling in the direction of the back wall, where a stairwell rising up to the catwalks was guarded by a hulking Yuzzem. I-Five got pretty close to the Yuzzem when Den hopped off his barstool and started making his way toward the refresher.

Of course, that was when I-Five kicked in top speed and rammed Den in the side.

The astromech was not a big droid but Den Dhur was not a big Sullustan. He went flying with exaggerated abandon while I-Five kicked into an immediate reverse that sent all three drinks smashing and splashing across the floor.

Den popped up his feet and shouted to the Yuzzem, "What did you *do*? Your stupid droid smashed into me!" He began feeling up his hips and torso. "I think... I think I might be hurt..."

The Yuzzem grunted and walked onto the floor. Jax and Magash moved quickly and slipped behind the Yuzzem. All attention was on it as it picked up Den easily with one paw and stood him upright. I-Five, meanwhile, rolled away into the crowd before anyone could grab him too.

Den clutched his hip like he'd hurt it and cried, "I think I broke something! A fracture, yes, a fracture! Who owns this place? I hope he likes getting sued! I'll have you know my lawyer-"

A slick humanoid appeared from behind the bar-counter. "Sir, if you'd quiet down-"

"Quiet down? You *sleemos* almost killed me!"

Jax and Magash sprinted up the stairwell and onto the catwalk. Kolvus' personal quarters were supposedly at the end of the hallway shooting back behind them but part of Jax wanted to stay and watch Den's performance.

Down below, the bartender said, "Sir, please, if you can, ah, manage, we'll provide your next drink on the house."

"You're *bribing* me?" Den huffed. "You should try fixing your fragging droids. That's a better use of money! I bet this happens all the time! Where is that tin can anyway? I bet-"

"Two drinks," said the bartender.

"Oh," Den said, "That's different."

At that point, Jax and Magash scampering down the hall, trusting that everything was well in hand.

* * *

After I got my stellar performance in, I had the easy part of the gig. Den Dhur, ex-journalist and information-gatherer extraordinaire, was subsequently treated to his third Bidalian Sunrise of the evening, this one free of charge, which was good, because we weren't exactly rolling in money just then.

When I took my drink and hauled myself onto the bar-end stool I'd just vacated, I quickly slipped the comlink out of my jacket and brought it to my mouth. Just after I got served some slobbering Snivvian came up to the bar and tried to hawk some totally-legit, secretly-taken, very scandalous images of some holostar or another, which kept the bartender busy and meant I could talk to the fifth and last member of our team with some level of privacy.

"Sacha, you there?" I said very, very quietly. The comlink was calibrated to pick up only very close-range audio vibrations.

"Read your loud and clear." A human woman's voice came in through my right earplug. Sullustan hearing is so good we normally have to go around with sound-dampening plugs in our ears when we're in places like noisy Coruscant nightclubs, and it wasn't hard to insert a tiny audio grille into mine.

"Kolvus is out. Jax and Magash are in."

"Great. I've got their speeder on standby."

"Where's I-Five?"

"Rolling my way over to her now," I-Five's voice chirped in my ear.

"Nobody tried to stop you?" I asked.

"I'm a *droid*, Den. Nobody looks twice at me no matter what I do."

"Okay, sure. Just be careful. And Sacha, be ready."

"Of course. Swiftbird out."

The link in my ear went silent. I deftly slipped my comlink back into my vest and took another drink. The bartender was finally getting the Snivvian to move on, with a little intimidation from the big Yuzzem bouncer. Nobody had seemed to notice my little chat, which was just what I wanted.

The bartender walked down to my end of the counter and said graciously, "Let me know when you want your second drink."

"Will do." I nodded slightly, and he walked away.

I did my best to nurse my Bidalian Sunrise slowly and casually and a little grumpily. I certainly didn't want it known that I was currently worried out of my mind. I didn't like this mission. I'd voted against it. We were trying to break into the lair of a powerful Black Sun Vigo and steal his most prized possession, and for what? This wasn't some official job for Whiplash, our resistance cell. This was just a good deed, the kind Jedi like Jax Pavan are perpetual suckers for.

But I was part of it because I was part of Jax Pavan's life. I was part of *that* because a certain intrepid, miraculously sentient droid name I-5YQ had once been friends with Pavan's late father and wanted desperately to protect the son, and I couldn't leave I-Five because he'd been, more or less, *my* best friend since we met on Drongar during the Clone Wars.

But that's all a long weird story. You'll get the full of it if you let me tell it all. It still seems pretty ridiculous to me after all this time. Me, the droid, and the Jedi, brothers in arms. If I'd tried to write an article about it nobody would have believed me, not that my style was in demand much then, what with the Emperor's new views on press freedom.

So instead I'm stuck here, telling it to you.

I'm just glad somebody still listens.

There was a wide spectrum of ways to get through the locked, triple-plated blast doors that marked the threshold to Vigo Kolvus' personal penthouse in back of the Diamond Star entertainment center. They ranged from the sneaky and subtle to the loud and destructive. Neither Jax Pavan nor anyone on his team, even I-Five, was an expert slicer, and even an expert would have probably had a hard time breaking a Black Sun Vigo's encryption.

Jax and Magash, however, had skills nobody was expecting to have to counter, especially in this day and age. Jax pressed himself up against the smooth metal of the blast door; his splayed hands and palms laid flat against the surface and he bent so his forehead touched the cool metal. He closed his eyes and stretched out with the Force.

He hadn't been an expert at using the Force to influence mechanics during his training, but he'd gotten better at it since the fall of the Jedi Order, possibly because of the time he'd spent around I-Five. No matter the reason, his Force-sense allowed him to mentally map out the inner workings of the blast doors. He sensed the two sets of heavy latches connecting the door to the left wall. He sensed the mechanical gears and pumps that connected it to the left wall.

It was old, simple, and durable technology.

It would be pretty easy to force open too.

Beside him, Magash mirrored his motion. He could feel her, too, stretching out with the Force as he'd taught her.

"Can you feel the locks?" he whispered.

She nodded slightly, cheek pressed against the door.

"Pop them on three. I'll move the door. Ready?"

She nodded again.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. It was as though he was gripping the pulls and gears with his own strong hands. He had no doubt he could move them; he just hoped Magash could pull the locks open.

If this didn't work, he could always use his lightsaber. It was why they'd smuggled it in here, after all.

"One," he whispered. "Two. Three. Go."

He felt the lock inside the door pop up and detach from the left wall. At the exact same moment, he pushed the door sideways into the right wall. It was more difficult than he'd anticipated; instead of whooshing to the side the door groaned heavily as he moved it.

When it opened far enough, Magash slipped through. A second later, the Zabrak woman's hand grabbed him by the arm and pulled him through the gap.

Without his Force-pull, the door slid shut again. Standing with their backs against it, they could hear its locks snapping back into place.

There was a control panel on the wall beside them, Jax hoped it would be easier getting out than getting in.

"All right," Magash whispered, "Where now?"

They were staring down a long, long hallway. At the end of it was some broad dark living room. The only lights came from the winking Coruscant skyline beyond floor-to-ceiling windows. Real or just holos, Jax couldn't tell.

He stretched out, searching for surveillance devices. He didn't sense any cameras, which wasn't a surprise; no Black Sun Vigo would install cameras a slicer could use to spy on him. He also tried to detect motion- or heat-sensors but found nothing.

"I think we're okay," Jax whispered. "Come on, let's go."

Magash nodded and wordlessly took out her staff. With a shift of the thumb, two meter-long metal pikes popped out of either end of the cylindrical grip.

The Dathomiri woman took point. Jax took out his light-saber but didn't ignite it. He hoped he wouldn't need it.

When they reached the living room they didn't turn on the lights. Jax's eyes had mostly adjusted to the darkness and Magash's Zabrak eyes were naturally well-equipped for it. A stairway led to a whole second level of rooms, while couches and tables laden with art objects filled the lower level.

"Do you sense her?" Magash whispered.

"I sense... something," Jax muttered, which he knew wasn't helpful at all.

Magash made a face, but before she could complain about her teacher's poor Jedi skills another voice said, "Stop, both of you."

It came from behind them. Jax dropped his lightsaber to the side, hoping the newcomer hadn't gotten a good look at the deactivated weapon.

"I said *stop*," the voice repeated before either of the could turn around fully.

"It's all right." Jax deftly stuck his saber into his pocket and raised both hands. "We're not here to hurt you."

"Who are you?" The person, a woman, was audibly trembling. "Kral didn't send you. Did he?"

"You're Lian'nor, aren't you?" Jax said.

There was no response. He turned a little more.

"I said stop!" the woman half-shouted.

"Be quiet," Magash said at once.

"Lian, we're here to help you. Dalla'nor sent us." Jax said. He could see her silhouette in the corner of his eyes. She was standing behind a kitchen counter with a blaster held in two hands. She seemed to be dressed in a bathrobe. Two Twi'lek head-tails fell free down her back.

"You're lying," she said. "My brother doesn't care about me."

"He paid good money to get you out of here." Jax said. It was true; the man had offered Jax and company his entire life savings to get his sister away from Black Sun. The initial down payment was all Jax intended to take, though he'd get an earful about turning down more money from Den.

"You're *lying*," Lian'nor insisted. "My brother... I haven't seen him in... in..."

"You've been Kral Kolvus' kept woman for two years," Magash said. "It's time to be your own."

"You're don't understand." Lian'nor shook her head. She still had he blaster raised but Jax didn't think she would shoot. "He's got... what I... need..."

Jax shifted a little more and got a better look. She was clearly shaking and he guessed it wasn't only from fear. He'd been afraid of this.

"What you need is to be with people who love you, not people who *use* you," Jax said.

"But the glitstim," Lian'nor moaned. "I *need* it..."

"There are ways to wean you off your need for that substance," Magash said. "If you allow us-"

"Who *are* you people?" Lian'nor said, finally dropping the gun, like it was too heavy to hold up any more.

"We help people. That's all that matters." Jax turned to face her fully. "Can we turn on some lights?"

The Twi'lek woman fumbled for a switch on the wall. For a second Jax was afraid the whole room would go black and blind them, but instead only one row of blue-white lights turned on over the kitchen counter. They shone down on Lian'nor's face, highlighting her high cheekbones, her heavy eyes, her broad mouth, her bright green skin-

She looked so much like Laranth that Jax went weak at the knees.

Magash sensed his distress and steadied him with a silent touch of the Force. She told Lian'nor, "Come. We'll get you out of here immediately."

Lian'nor looked back and forth between them. "You did all this for *me*? Do you have any idea what Kral will *do* to you people when he finds out?"

Jax had dealings with Black Sun in the past and knew full well what the organization, and individual Vigos, were capable of. It had been enough to make him balk when Lian'nor's brother had approached them for help, but now that he was here, standing in front of this woman who looked so much like Laranth but was so broken by drugs and captivity, all his doubts fell away.

"We can take care of ourselves," Magash said. "Come. We must go."

"No, wait!" Lian'nor shook her head. "I need... just a little more."

"A little more *what*?" asked Jax, though he already knew the answer.

"Just a little more," Lian'nor tucked her blaster into the voluminous pocket of her robe, then ducked out of the light.

Jax and Magash hurried after her as she retreated down a hallway. For a second Jax thought she was fleeing, but through the Force he felt only the desperate need of an addict.

Lian'nor turned into a side room and a light flickered on. Jax stopped in front of the doorway and stared, squinting, into the glow.

Inside, Lian'nor was on her knees, scrambling to grab a few brick-sized packages from a massive pile that rose to the ceiling.

"Oh, *kark*," Jax breathed. "How much does he *keep* here?"

Lian'nor hugged one packet of spice against his chest. "They sell it right out of the club. They have... sixty, seventy packs here."

Jax tried to calculate how many credits' worth of glitterstim spice was piled in front of him. He tried to figure out how many addicts this could feed, or how many it could create. He could never know for sure how many lives it would ruin, but it was too many.

Lian'nor grabbed one more packet of spice and rose on wobbly legs. "This'll be good... for a while."

Two packs would last one small Twi'lek woman months. Jax intended to get her away from them, but not now; she'd only put up too much of a fight.

"Okay," he said, and before Magash could object, he told her, "Help Lian'nor get some clothes. Now."

Magash nodded curtly and grabbed the Twi'lek woman by the arm. Lian'nor muttered directions to her room but Jax didn't hear them. The women left him staring at the massive pile of spice, wondering the easiest way to destroy all of it forever.

The properties of various addictive drugs weren't something they'd taught him at the Jedi Temple, but after hiding in the Coruscant underworld for two years he'd picked up his share of tricks. He knew that, when exposed to water, glitterstim became corrupted and unusable.

He carefully took out his lightsaber and thumbed it on. Its monotone hum echoed and filled the gaping silence in the storage room. As he hefted his green blade he thought for a moment on all

the beings whose lives had been ruined by this spice, beings like Lian'nor, and thinking of Lian'nor made him think of Laranth, and thinking of Laranth threatened to destroy the inner equilibrium he'd struggled to establish in the wake of her death.

He closed his eyes, breathed in, breathed out. Then he swung his saber down. He didn't even feel the green energy-blade cut through the packages and spill out cubic meters of spice. He opened his eyes and looked at all the pale dust now spilled across the floor, then at the brick wall of packages still intact. He took another breath, and began working on the rest.

When that was done, he went to the kitchen and found the biggest pot he could. He quickly filled it with water, then clutched it with two hands and started to carry it back down the hall to the storage room.

He was almost there when he heard Lian'nor squawk behind him, "What are you *doing*?"

Jax looked over his shoulder and saw the Twi'lek woman in a loose pull-over dress and black jacket bulging with the spice bricks she'd claimed. Her feet were bare on the carpet and Magash had one hand on her shoulder, trying to pull her back into the living room.

Realization sparked in Lian'nor's addled mind. She lunged forward, tearing her shoulder free of Magash's grip. Jax ran the last few steps, spilling a quarter of the pot, and when he got to the storage room he flung the thing out in front of him. Water splashed out over the pile of spice. There was a faint chorus of popping sounds as the water washed the powder clean of its addictive properties.

"No!" Lian'nor screamed from behind him. She shoved him against the wall and fell down in the pile of dissolving spice.

"It's gone," Jax told her. "Now come on. We have to go. *Now*."

"No!" Lian'nor shouted again. She reared up and pulled her blaster pistol from her bulky jacket.

Instinct took over. Jax's lightsaber flew into his hand and jumped to life. He batted Lian'nor's first shot into the wall. She didn't get off another. Magash wrestled the weapon from her hand with the Force and pulled it into her own.

"You," Lian'nor, panting, stared at them both. "You're *Jedi*."

"We're in trouble," Jax corrected.

* * *

Sullustan ears being what they are, I heard the gunshot that everyone else at the bar didn't. Still, if any gun went off in that building, *somebody* was going to hear it and take action, which meant all my ears were really worth was a few seconds' extra warning.

I popped out my comlink and brought it to my dewflaps. "Hey, Jax, you okay? Report."

I was eminently relieved to hear Jax's voice a second later. "Yeah, Den, we're okay. Somebody got a little edgy."

"Do you have the package?"

"Oh, yeah."

I spun around on my barstool to face the rest of the room and tried to look casual by stretching my stubby legs. My eyes darted up to the catwalks overhead, where two Barabel guards were half-jogging toward the Vigo's penthouse.

"Jax, you've got incoming."

I heard a hard breath. "Okay. Sacha, I-Five, you there?"

"Right here, boss, with our favorite tin can." Sacha said. "Got your speeder, too."

"Okay, one second." There was a scratching sound, then I heard Jax ask someone else, "Is that thing real?"

I had no idea what that meant, but a second later Jax told us, "Sacha, grab Den, then come around to the back of the building. We're going through the window."

I fought a sigh. I kind of knew it was going to turn out this way. It had been years since anything I'd done went according to plan.

I hopped off my stool and started across the main floor of the bar. "Okay, I'm heading for the exit now."

"We'll be there," Sacha said.

As I got closer to the door I heard muted blasterfire behind him, but nobody else seemed to, so I didn't turn around. I was,

frankly, terrified some big Yuzzem or Wookiee was going to sweep me off my feet and throw me in some Black Sun prison cell, but apparently nobody figured out that I was in on the little infiltrate-and-rescue mission.

So instead, I just walked out the door, between the two towering Trandoshan guards, and went right to the loading dock, where our speeder was waiting for me.

I didn't know how Jax, Magash, and the package would have to cram in here, so I took the middle seat behind Sacha. The woman-tall, with one silver streak through her long black hair and an artificial left eye that apparently marred what humans consider good looks- didn't even say hello to me. She just kicked in the engines and sent us whipping out into the night.

"Where's I-Five?" I asked. I couldn't see him anywhere.

"I'm in the trunk," my friend's voice grumbled through my earpiece.

"Thought he'd be safer there," Sacha told me. "Don't know what we're getting into."

"With Jax, it's always a mess."

"I'm getting that idea. Kinda fun, isn't it?"

I groaned, and so did I-Five. Sacha spun our speeder around the side of the tower that hosted the Diamond Star, plus hidden Black Sun facilities.

"Any idea what we're looking for?" Sacha asked.

"No better than you," I grunted. I could guess, based on my knowledge of the club, where the rear of the pent-house would roughly be, but that didn't mean a whole lot when you were just trying to find one window out of several hundred where-

Then we spun around to the opposite side of the building, where everything was dark except for one window which flashed with the red of laserblasts and the swiping green of a lightsaber.

"Okay," Sacha said, "Found it."

* * *

Jax Pavan was ducked behind a sofa, lightsaber in one hand, Lian'nor's blaster pistol in the other, trying not to accidentally cut one of his own limbs off as he alternately deflected blasterfire coming from the hallway and returned a few volleys of his own. His shots were poorly-aimed, but enough to keep the Black Sun goons on their toes.

As for the package, Magash Drashi had her pinned down on the floor to the side of the room, well-clear of the firing range of the goons stuck in the hallway. The Twi'lek woman kept shouting and raving even with a mouthful of carpet and she was struggling so much even Magash had a hard time holding her down. Jax wanted to tell her just to knock Lian'nor out and save them the trouble but he was too busy trying to not amputate himself.

Then Sacha's voice said in his ear: "Right behind you, boss!"

"You sure?" he asked.

"Unless there's somebody else putting on a lightshow."

Bright light flashed through the window behind him and filled the room. It was enough to blind the attackers for a moment, giving Jax space to turn around and Force-hurl his lightsaber at the blaster-proof windows behind him. His saber wove a curved loop around the window, more than big enough for a few people to jump through.

The harsh wind of Coruscant's artificial chasms rushed into the room. Lian'nor shouted louder.

"Go!" Jax screamed over the wind-rush. "Now! I'll cover!"

Magash heard or sensed it. She grabbed the Twi'lek woman and hauled her to her feet. Jax turned his attention to the hallway. Sacha's twin headlights blared down the narrow space and the two Black Sun goons struggled to adjust their aim. Jax switched his pistol to *stun*, stood up from behind the sofa, and popped off a shot that knocked one Barabel against the wall. He adjusted his aim slightly and stunned the other one next. When he glanced back at the first Barabel, the guard was already starting to move.

Tough rodders, Jax thought, then turned and raced for the window.

Magash was already there. He could feel her drawing on the Force and gave her an extra boost as she jumped. Sachs tilted her nose and her headlights down, dropping the penthouse into darkness again but allowing Magash and Lian'nor to spill into the back seat, right on top of a flailing Den Dhur.

Without looking back, Jax charged through the window. The Force carried him through the air, right into the front passenger seat next to Sacha.

"Okay," the woman said, "Can we go *now*?"

"Mission accomplished," Jax grinned.

Sacha rolled her speeder away from the window, pointed her nose upward, and kicked the engines on full. Behind them, pistol-blasts lanced ineffectively into the vast Coruscant night.

As the wind whipped long hair around his head, Jax turned back to the other passengers.

"Everybody okay back there?" he called.

"I am undamaged," Magash reported.

"You took it," Lian'nor whimpered. "You took it *all*."

From somewhere beneath the two of them, Den Dhur moaned, "Two free drinks was *not* worth this."

And in Jax's ear, I-Five's mechanized voice said, "You know, maybe the trunk isn't so bad after all."

2

"Sometimes they say you can judge a man by the quality of his enemies. If that's true, well, it says it lot that Jax's nemesis was Darth Vader himself. I never understood the full depth of their relationship, and I knew I never would. For those of us who were with Jax, Vader became our nemesis too. I'm proud to say I outlived the bastard. I just wish I more of us could claim the same."

For a second he could almost remember it all: the motion of light on water, the rush of fresh air into his chest, the tickle of small fingers across the lines of a palm, the chatter of leaves in sudden wind, the burned-red inside of an eyelid in sunlight.

He remembered twin suns burning over an ocean of sand, and noon light dancing over the face of a blue lake rimmed by hills and forest. Tatooine and Naboo: the two places he'd once called home, that had made him, that he could never go back to, but which sometimes seemed to *real* he could almost believe he'd never left.

Then the second was over, and he was a dead man again.

He knew someone was coming. As he sat within his meditation chamber, Darth Vader could feel her thoughts in the Force. It was a familiar cocktail of anxiety and dread, one he produced in most beings now, but for every individual the reaction was slightly different. For Inquisitor Nera Masiq, fear of him was always mixed

with fear of other things: her fellow Inquisitors, the distant phantom Jedi, most of all the Emperor himself.

With the slight touch of a finger, he rotated his chair to face the entrance of the chamber. The doors were closed but he could feel her just beyond, hesitating slightly. Then he felt her summon courage and press the button. The doors to his chamber opened. A young woman framed by the threshold stood with her hands clasped behind her back and her body straight. Her dark hair was tied at the back of her neck and she was dressed in the red-and-black robes all Inquisitors wore.

Without stepped deeper into his chamber, Masiq said, "Lord Vader, your presence has been requested by the Emperor."

Vader didn't move from his chair. He didn't speak. The only sound in the chamber was the slow rasping of his breath through the mask of his helmet.

It took Masiq visible effort not to flinch from his blank black gaze, but he hardly paid her attention. Normally when the Emperor sought his presence, all Darth Sidious had to do was touch his mind through the Force. Normally he preferred to do so; the Dark Lord liked to show off his dominance over his apprentice.

Something was different today. Vader had no idea what, and the only way to learn was to go to his master and receive whatever he was meant to receive, be it orders, criticism, or threats. No matter what, he knew it would be part of the twisted mindgame that Sidious liked to play.

Without speaking to Masiq, Darth Vader rose from his chair and walked toward the threshold. The Inquisitor carefully skirted out of his way, then followed behind the billowing black trail of his cape as he marched down the halls of Imperial Palace.

It had been almost two years since the Declaration of the New Order. The day after the declaration, Sidious had ordered construction of his new palace, and though the massive facility was far from complete, it now rose like an artificial mountain in the center of Imperial City. The Palace was a city in itself, and even Vader only knew a small portion of its labyrinthine halls.

His personal quarters were relatively close to the Emperor's, but even then it took him fifteen minutes to arrive at the entry chamber. Masiq followed silently the entire way, uncertain of what to do but afraid to speak up or leave without a direct dismissal. Like so many of the Force-sensitives he and the Emperor had gathered under their wing after the extermination of the Jedi Order, she was at heart a timid creature, motivated more by fear of punishment than a true desire for power. In a way Vader was glad of that, because it made the Inquisitors easy to control and easy to replace.

When he entered the vestibule to the Emperor's throne room he stopped immediately; Masiq half-stumbled to avoid stepping on his cape. At the far end of the long red carpet running to the throne room's entrance were four guardsmen dressed in faceless crimson helmets, with voluminous crimson robes hiding their deadly force pikes and fine-crafted body armor. Two flanked the door on either side and between them, standing before the threshold as if expecting it to simply open, was High Inquisitor Jerec.

Most members of the Inquisitorius were half-trained Jedi dropouts and stray Force-sensitives like Masiq or Darth Vader's recently deceased protégé Probus Tesla. There were exceptions, and none were greater than Jerec. The Miralukan had been an esteemed Jedi Master before the fall of the Republic. During Anakin Skywalker's years of training he'd only seen the man from afar, but he'd been considered the greatest Jedi scholar after his own teacher, Jocasta Nu. Jerec and his apprentice, Ameesa Darys, had disappeared on an archaeological research mission in the Unknown Regions before the Clone Wars began, only to return again after the declaration of the New Order.

Darth Sidious had handled the captured Jerec's inter-rogation personally. Vader did not know what had passed between them, but Jerec had quickly become one of the Emperor's most trusted Inquisitors, and Ameesa Darys had become one of his most lethal attack dogs until her death at Bavinyar nearly a year ago.

When Darys died, Vader had been hopeful that Jerec's ascension would falter. For a short time, it had seemed so, but to his

alarm the High Inquisitor seemed to be drawing new apprentices to his side.

When Vader did not step down the red carpet to meet Jerec, the High Inquisitor called to him.

"Greetings, Lord Vader. I see the Emperor has summoned you as well."

"He has," Vader said evenly. He glanced stiffly over one shoulder and told Masiq, "You are dismissed."

The woman gave a stiff bow and left. She kept her relief from her face but not from the Force.

Vader walked steadily down the carpet to where Jerec waited. The Miralukan looked almost human, with a pale skin marked by black Sith tattoos trailing from the corners of his mouth; a recent addition, surely added to please Darth Sidious. A thin strip of black cloth was wrapped around the bald dome of his head to cover the pits where he eyes would have been. Jerec was physically blind, but the Force granted him all the awareness he needed.

Vader sometimes wondered if Jerec, too, felt permanently detached from the world of normal beings, but it was something he had never asked, and certainly wouldn't ask now.

"I must say, Lord Vader, I'm slightly surprised to see you here."

Jerec was generally a polite, restrained man, but Vader knew bragging when he heard it.

"I am surprised to see *you*, High Inquisitor." He placed both hands on his belt. "My audiences with the Emperor are typically more... intimate."

"As are mine." Jerec inclined his head slightly. "I have great news for him. Perhaps, in his wisdom, he has already seen what I am about to tell him and wants to share it with you."

Since the death of his first apprentice, Jerec had been cultivating a small cadre of replacements who were personally loyal to him. Vader had already alerted the Emperor to this, and Darth Sidious had done nothing to intervene. Clearly he thought an ambitious subordinate was worth the risk if he got short-term results, and he seemed to be right.

Without warning, the doors guarding the throne room slid apart. Vader and Jerec stood side-by-side before the threshold and looked down the red carpet's continued stretch. The Emperor's throne room was long and narrow with a peaked ceiling and a high transparisteel window looking out on the late-afternoon skyline of Imperial City. Seemingly dwarfed by the vista and half-silhouetted against the gleaming city was the Emperor's throne.

An old man's voice, twenty meters away but loud and clear, said, "Come to me, my servants."

Vader and Jerec marched toward the throne, step matching step. When they came within three meters of their Emperor they dropped in unison to one knee and bowed their heads.

"Good, good," the Emperor chuckled dryly. "I am glad to see the two of you are working... in sync."

Before Jerec could speak, Vader said, "Why have you called us here, Master?"

"Rise, both of you," the Emperor said.

Vader and Jerec stood and straightened. The man huddled in his black cloak was scarcely recognizable as the Palpatine who had assumed control of the Galactic Republic during the Naboo crisis fifteen years before, then led it into the Clone Wars. While aged, the Chancellor had been a man of dignified speech and cultivated appearance. The Emperor was a wasted man with hairless sagging skin and sunken eyes that glowed dimly yellow from the shade of his hood.

"High Inquisitor Jerec," the Emperor said, "I believe you have news for me."

"I do, my Lord." Jerec bowed his head slightly. "I am pleased to say that my Inquisitors have captured a number of Jedi."

Vader's rhythmic, rasping breath paused for just a second. His mind flashed through the Jedi unaccounted for since Order 66, from Yoda and Kenobi on down. For months he'd been driven, even obsessed, with tracking down not any great Master but simple Jax Pavan. Despite being barely past apprenticeship, Pavan had escaped him after three separate encounters. He knew this had lowered him

in the eyes of his Emperor, and now Jerec stood ready to rise even higher.

"Captured, have you?" asked Sidious. "And how, Lord Jerec, did you manage this feat?"

"In my research I learned of an interesting animal with the ability to push back the Force. This creature is called a ysalamiri and it is native to the planet Myrkr. Once placed in a room adjacent to the ysalamiri, these Jedi are power-less."

"This is a fascinating find, High Inquisitor. Please go on."

Jerec smiled, just a little. "Inquisitor Drayneen has been tracking the Jedi belonging to the splinter sect led by Master Djinn Altis. After assisting in the evacuation of Bavinyar earlier this year, Master Altis seems to have abandoned his academy ship and scattered his remaining nights. She was able to locate one of his hiding places on Lucazec and led a team there."

Vader tensed. Once, a long time ago, Anakin Skywalker had done a mission with Altis. The old man had seemed open and earnest in a way his real masters never had. In his splinter sect of the Order, Jedi were allowed to fall in love and even marry. If Anakin had been trained by Altis instead of Kenobi and Yoda...

It was a line of thought Vader tried not to dwell on.

"I am aware of Drayneen's movements," Palpatine said. "Tell me, have we captured Master Altis?"

"She has captured Djinn Altis, a young female apprentice, and," Jerec paused for emphasis. "A very old Jedi Master named Kina Ha."

It was worse than Vader feared. The ancient Jedi, the product of some life-extending genetic experiments by her people, the Kaminoans, had been one of Darth Sidious' most hunted prizes.

"Where are they now?" the Emperor asked. His voice was suddenly tense, hungry.

"They are inbound on the Perlemian, my Lord. Shall I bring them to Coruscant?"

"No. They must be taken to a more secure location."

"Shall I send them to Prakith?" Jerec asked, naming the world in the Deep Core where the Inquisitors were building a base.

The Emperor did not answer at first; he seemed surprisingly uncertain about something, like he was pondering another location. Even Vader didn't know the extent of the build-up the Emperor was undertaking in the Deep Core. Sidious had recently begun creating secret research facilities into that star-choked labyrinth, some even deeper in than Prakith.

Unknown to his master, Vader had learned that cloning templates were being cultivated for the likes of Sate Pestate, the Emperor's advisor, and even the late Ameesa Darys. He just didn't know *where* these new experiments were taking place.

Finally, Sidious said, "Send them to Prakith... for now. Do not attempt to remove them from your ship."

"As you command, my Lord."

"Of course." Sidious shifted his yellow eyes to Vader. "And have *you* anything to report, Lord Vader?"

Vader knew when he was being humiliated, even if Jerec and Sidious gave nothing away. He said, "Not at this time, my Lord."

"And that young man who has so eluded you, Jax Pavan? Have you encountered him again?"

"Not recently, my Lord."

"Then perhaps you should keep searching for him. I would have for all your efforts these past months to be a waste."

"They will *not* be, my Lord."

"I should certainly hope so, my *young* apprentice."

"Do you have any orders for me?"

The Emperor seemed to consider again. "Not at this time. However, once Altis and Kina Ha are safely in our custody, I may call on you."

"And what of me, my Lord?" Jerec asked. "Should I go to Prakith?"

It was impudence, speaking to the Emperor without being spoken to first, but Dark Sidious didn't seem to mind. "Not yet, High Inquisitor. Remain on Imperial Center and await further instructions."

"As you wish."

"Now go, both of you." He waved a withered hand. "I have much to think about."

"Very good, my Lord," Vader and Jerec said at once, but Sidious was already rotating his throne to face the cityscape.

Vader and Jerec walked as one down the carpet and out through the door. It sealed shut behind them, leaving them in the silent vestibule with two crimson guards on either side.

Jerec was not a man to gloat, and he didn't need to anyway. He gave Darth Vader a tiny nod, then walked toward the exit, black cloak fluttering behind him. Vader watched him go and wondered if that man really was as passionless inside as he seemed from the outside. He wondered if that detachment wasn't the reason for his success. Either way, he found himself envying the man.

Vader knew his mistakes. His fixation on Jax Pavan, that flimsy tether connecting him to Anakin Skywalker's years as a Jedi, had been the worst of them. He'd tried again and again to cut that tether and free himself from Anakin Skywalker's ghost but every time he'd failed.

He needed a new approach, a new strategy. He considered Jerec, and thought he had some place to start.

3

"I probably flatter myself to think that we were Darth Vader's number one priority. The galaxy is a big place and even then, when the Empire was still new, there were a lot of people trying to take it down. Our group, the Whiplash, was just one of them. We did small things because we had small tools. Other people had big tools, and believe me, they did big things with them."

Jan Dodonna had signed on as a policeman and ended up a war hero. He wouldn't have minded that so much if they'd let him go back to being a policeman now that the war was over, but unfortunately, he had no such luck.

General Dodonna had joined the Galactic Republic Judicial Forces with the simple desire to keep peace in the galaxy. That alone had set him apart from many of his peers, who'd grown up with stories of great naval engagements of the past and, consciously or not, yearned for a re-militarization of the Republic so they could live out the old heroic fantasies. When the Clone Wars came they'd gotten their chance. Even when the wars were done, and the Republic became an Empire, the fighting didn't seem to end. Dodonna and his friend, Admiral Adar Tallon, had spent the better part of the past year putting down the Sy Myrthian Insurrection, and even now Tallon was chasing die-hard Tooran rebels on the fringes of Hutt Space.

Dodonna's current assignment, at least, was a calm one. His duty was to oversee the construction of the new naval shipyards over the planet N'zoth, in the Farlax Sector. Farlax was located in the Koornacht Cluster on the edge of the Deep Core, a region where old stars shining red or dark orange were packed tightly together. They made for a dazzling sight whenever you looked out a viewport, so very different from the starfields of vast black and pinpoints of white that you saw everywhere else in the galaxy.

Because of the density of old stars and stellar gasses they produced, the Deep Core was also a difficult area of space to navigate. N'zoth was a difficult system to attack and also a difficult system to send large quantities of ships out of. Most of the Separatist hold-outs were fighting on the Outer Rim, and the decision to build a new base here struck Dodonna as inexplicable.

Still, he had been stationed at the new Black Fifteen yards for three months and he hadn't seen a single minute of actual combat. He should have felt better about that, but there was plenty else that unsettled him.

N'zoth had been conquered just two years ago, as part of the final offensives that accompanied the end of the Republic and the birth of the Empire. While most beings' attention had been drawn to the Outer Rim sieges, there had also been a burst of action in the Deep Core, and Yevethan space had been one of the big spoils gained.

Conquest for the sake of bringing order sat uneasy with Dodonna, but even he had a hard time sympathizing with N'zoth's native sentients. The Yevetha were a cruel and violent race. They were also clever, and had been pressed into service constructing the orbital station and new ships over N'zoth. Their stubbornness and insubordination was in turn making their Imperial conquerors more violent and cruel. More than once he'd had to punish his officers for beating Yevethan workers to the point of death. In the mess and the hallways, he heard men speak about Yevetha with naked disdain that in turn spilled over to disdain for *other* non-humans who, they said, were only good for hard labor: Wookiees, Togorians, Trandoshans. Several times he'd heard the assertion that

all so-called aliens were too stupid to run their own affairs and needed human masters to do it for them.

The Imperial Navy had become something very different from the Judicial police force he'd signed up for a long time ago. He had a feeling this project at N'zoth would not end well for anyone involved.

He tried to put foreboding out of his mind and do his duty. He spent as much time as possible on the command deck of N'zoth's orbital command station. Even after three months some of the crew seemed awed by the presence of a war hero, but thankfully they'd gotten better at hiding it. The daily routine, with small variations, included overseeing ship movement and refueling, supply drops for vessels charting the Deep Core further (those had gotten more common lately), and of course the construction of new docking pylons radiating out from the command station's main disc.

Every day had a slightly different schedule, allowing for the coming and going of new ships, and Dodonna tried to adhere to it as strictly as possible. During the war Tallon had chided him for being *too* reliant on schedules, rules, and regulations; he'd replied that those were what distinguished a true navy from a rabble.

He was, therefore, slightly discomfited when the *Victory*-class star destroyer *Javelin* appeared an hour before it should have. Normally when the schedule slipped it was because ships took too long navigating through the Koornacht Cluster's dense starfields, not less.

Nonetheless, *Javelin* hailed them with the familiar voice of a clone crewman. "Black Fifteen, we are requesting to dock and refuel."

"Welcome, *Javelin*," said the lieutenant at the communications station. "You are cleared for bay E-6."

Dodonna leaned close over the officer's shoulder and said, "Ask them to transmit clearance codes."

The lieutenant half-jumped in his seat, then looked back at Dodonna. "Is that necessary, sir?"

"Just do it."

Dodonna kept hovering over his shoulder as the comm officer called the destroyer and requested proper identification. The correct code came through thirty seconds later, which made Dodonna feel better, if not quite calm. He watched through the station's main viewport as *Javelin's* pale dagger maneuvered to the refueling station on E-arm. The only other vessel currently topping up was *Leveler*, a refitted *Acclamator*-class assault carrier, which had been sitting at port for three days and was nearly empty of staff and supplies.

As the destroyer settled carefully into its berth, Dodonna told the comm lieutenant, "Patch me a direct line with *Starwind*, please."

"Yes, General. One moment."

Dodonna walked toward the edge of the deck and plucked the comlink from his breast pocket. He waited until he heard the click of a connection and said, "*Starwind*, this is Black Fifteen. Do you copy?"

"Loud and clear, General," said the voice on the other line. Captain Ni-sihl-Nahm had fought under Dodonna when he and Terrinald Screed battled Dua Ningo's Separatist fleet, and whenever he doubted what direction the new Empire was taking he reminded himself that good beings, human or Cerean or anything else, still captained good ships.

"How do things look out there, Ni-sihl?" He peered out the viewport and spotted *Starwind's* blue ion-engine flares as the destroyer continued its patrol around the other edges of N'zoth's gravity well.

"As empty as ever, sir. Should I expect otherwise?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted. If Tallon were here, he'd have accused Dodonna of being anal again. "Keep an eye open, would you?"

There was a pause. Likely Ni-sihl was confused and frustrated by such vague orders; Dodonna would have been in his place. But instead of complaining, Ni-sihl acted like a good officer and said, "Understood, General. *Starwind* out."

Dodonna gave a little sigh and clicked off his comlink. He watched *Javelin* pull into dock and *Starwind* drift by in the distance and wondered if he wasn't getting bored of so much peace after all.

* * *

Sometimes it seemed like you could go anywhere you wanted so long as you wore the right mask.

When they marched through the airlock umbilical connecting their star destroyer to the E-arm of the new Black Fifteen orbital station, no one bothered to question one trim young officer with a lieutenant's bars and two squadrons in white clone trooper armor.

They quickly made their way to dock E-3, where *Leveler* was currently docked. The lead clone officer recited his identification to the clone guards at the entrance to the airlock, then marched right up into the bowels of the ship.

It cavernous landing bay and cargo storage rooms were, alas, mostly empty, but that didn't matter. The halls were empty and dark. *Leveler* had been fitted with advanced computer systems during the war that made her able to operate with even less crew than a normal ship of her class, which meant she was almost entirely empty as she sat in spacedock.

They were, therefore, able to march right up to the bridge without anyone trying to stop them. On the command deck there was a grand total of twelve people, all of them officers and crewmen in green-gray uniforms and no armor, wearing only service pistols. The ranking officer, another lieutenant, looked at them quizzically as they marched onto his deck.

He said, "I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting anyone. May I see your reassignment orders?"

The men in clone armor at the front of the line snapped up their rifles as one and fired a volley of stun bolts. Twelve bodies hit the ground at the same time and the bridge dropped into stillness and silence for one long moment.

Then A'Sharad Hett pulled his white helmet off, exposing his tattoo-lined face to the air. "All right, everyone, to your places! Let's go!"

Avit Madrisk threw the lieutenant's cap off his head and scrambled for the tactical station. Hett followed him as the other men hurried to their stations. Some dropped into the crew pit to man the engines and guns; others rushed to the communications console. The blast doors came down quickly, sealing them at the head of the ship.

Compared to when they'd stolen *Valediction*, this was pathetically easy.

Madrisk turned on the tactical holo, which displayed the command station, all the ships docked there, and the one *Victory*-class destroyer running a slow patrol loop in N'zoth's outer orbit. At the moment it was passing away from the station and would soon be on the other side of the planet.

"We need to run before it comes back around. And before the real *Javelin* gets here." Madrisk ran a hand down his bearded jaw. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Hett nodded. "As long as they've refueled."

"Communications, status!" Madrisk barked.

"Coming online, captain," one of the men in white clone armor said.

"What about engines?" Hett asked Wells.

Down in the crew pit, Wells had removed his helmet, revealing the ubiquitous dark face and black hair that marked him as the only true clone among the boarding party. When they'd seized *Valediction* over Bavinyar, the vast majority of the clone soldiers onboard had refused to turn sides and had been left marooned on an uncharted planet. The ones that had stayed had been monitored closely, especially by Hett himself. After almost a year, he didn't need the Force to know what Wells was truly devoted to fighting the Empire he's been bred to serve; the man proved it by his actions.

"Engines are cold," Wells said. "Should we start them up now?"

"If we do, the Imps'll know something's up," said another commando, Bavinyar-born.

"I want to break before that patrol ship comes around," Madrisk told Hett. "Communications, can we patch in to *Valediction*?"

"We're ready, sir."

"Do it. Audio only." Madrisk stalked over to the comm station and Hett followed.

They loomed over the commando's white-armored head and waited for Syne to come over the speakers.

"*Leveler*, report." It was crisp, terse, and cold, but Hett was always glad to hear her voice.

"Madam, we have secured the vessel. No casualties," Madrisk said. "Recommend we make a break for it before that patrol ship loops around."

"Agreed. What is the status of your engines?"

"Cold as space. Have you refueled?"

"Almost. I recommend you start your engines now."

"That will draw the Imps' attention."

"I know. Stall them."

"Understood. *Leveler* out."

Madrisk stood back from the console and called over his shoulder, "Start those engines! Now!"

The bridge rattled for a moment, and the deck was filled with a low humming sound as the ship's engines began to warm. As the crew began to run further diagnostics, Madrisk caught Hett's eye and stared at him over the top of the commando's white helmet. For a second it all seemed to pass between them: the years spent fighting each other, the years spent fighting the Empire side-by-side. It was still a strange place A'Sharad Hett had found himself in, one that often left him confused and restless, but he was alive, he had his family, and he was hurting the Empire.

Given the circumstances, it was all he could hope for.

* * *

Jereveth Syne stood on the bridge of the star destroyer *Valediction* and watched the blue lights flare in *Leveler's* engine wells. Everything had gone according to plan thus far, but she still

felt anxious. The raid on N'zoth was by far the riskiest mission her people had undertaken since the so-called Miracle at Bavinyar ten months previous. The stakes now were lower, objectively speaking, but they felt so much higher.

"Are you all right, Madam?" asked a soft voice behind her.

Syne looked over her shoulder at Sajin Nevaleen. Unlike the rest of the people on the bridge, the young woman wore civilian clothes instead of the Bavinyar Defence Fleet uniform. Her blond hair was pulled over one shoulder and she clasped her datapad against her chest. Combined with the curiosity in her eyes, she looked like an expectant university student. Nonetheless, Syne trusted her judgment more than anyone on the ship, including her father's advisor, Andrein Yvolton, who acted as *Vale-diction's* captain now that Madrisk had joined A'Sharad Hett on *Leveler*.

When Syne did not respond right away, Sajin asked again, "Is everything all right, Madam?"

Syne allowed the woman a tiny smile. The life they'd all led over the past two years had been a grueling one: their homeworld had been subjugated, their fellow Bavinyari scattered, Syne's father had been killed, and the Galactic Empire that had done it all to them was an invincible enemy they had no choice but to fight.

Despite it all, Sajin had preserved the warmth, even the innocence, that Syne had known when they were both students together, before the Clone Wars and the Empire and a fugitive Jedi Master had changed everything in her life.

"I'm sure Jadesei is fine," Sajin assured her. "Slayke will do everything to keep her safe."

"Maybe so. But I don't want him raising my child."

Sajin smiled a little. "No, but it would be quite a sight, wouldn't it?"

Syne tried to picture big, barrel-chested, red-bearded, incessantly *loud* Zozridor Slayke raising her daughter, and, just for a moment, she was amused.

"We might as well get a Wookiee to do it," Syne said. "It would be about the same."

Sajin laughed lightly. Yvolton suddenly appeared between them. His brown captain's uniform made him seem more crisp and alert than Syne had seen him in a long time. His hair was still gray and his face still very lined, but her father's old friend had a new energy and alertness.

"Madam Syne," Yvolton said, "We have fully refueled."

"Excellent. Close the fueling port. Make sure the extension tube is clear before we leave dock."

"Should we call *Leveler*?" Sajin asked.

Syne glanced at the viewport. The blue glow in her engines was stronger, but not strong enough to punch them out of the N'zoth system, not yet. She needed a few more minutes.

"Madam," said Yvolton, "That patrol ship is going to be crossing back into visual range within five minutes. We should move before then."

"I agree," Sajin said.

Syne nodded. "All right. We'll call *Leveler*."

The three of them walked over to the communications station. Aside from a smattering of defecting clones, *Valediction* was crewed by the same men and women who had operated *Iconoclast*, the last surviving dread-naught from the Bavinyar Defense Fleet. At Bavinyar, Syne had sacrificed *Iconoclast* and gained *Valediction*, swapping an old cruiser for a brand-new destroyer.

It had certainly been a worthy trade, though it had taken months for her crew to acclimate themselves to this very different vessel. Finally, they seemed to be operating smoothly, and it was possible to pull off as daring an attack as this.

"*Leveler*," Syne spoke into the comm grid, "Please respond."

"Engines at seventy-five percent of optimal power," Madrisk reported.

"Has station command contacted you?"

"We told them we're running tests on the engines. It should stall them for a few minutes."

"Is your hyperdrive operational?"

"All systems show green, Madam."

"Good." Syne glanced at her wrist chrono. "In exactly two minutes and no sooner, you are to break free of all moorings and make for the exit vector. Is that under-stood?"

"Very clear, Madam. Will you follow?"

"We'll cover your escape."

"Good to know."

"Be ready." Syne flicked off her comlink and looked at Yvolton and Sajin. Old eyes and young eyes both shared a rare confidence. Syne couldn't bring herself to share it, but she appreciated it nonetheless. Any encouragement was welcome.

Once they were clear of all this, once she was holding her daughter in his arms again, she would feel safe.

* * *

"What do you *mean*, she's doing engine tests?"

Dodonna looked out the viewport at *Leveler* and scowled. He'd been busy going over the construction schedule with the Yevetha's human taskmaster for the past ten minutes, and nobody had bothered to inform him that *Leveler* had started her main ion drives despite being firmly attached to the E-pylon fueling station.

"She's been warming them steadily, sir," the communications lieutenant said. "They said they were testing their fuel ignition sequence."

"It's not on the schedule. She barely even has a crew." Dodonna frowned. His eyes darted from *Leveler* to the other destroyer docked at the pylon. "Has anyone left *Javelin*?"

"I'm not certain, sir."

"Then call E-pylon and *ask* them, Lieutenant."

The officer began to punch in the code for the fuel pylon, but before he could get a connection things started moving. *Leveler's* engines suddenly kicked to full power. The carrier pushed away from the pylon, roughly tearing off the docking tube.

"Comm, call *Leveler* now!" Dodonna barked.

"Yes, sir, sorry sir," the lieutenant fumbled the controls. "Sir, she's not responding."

As *Leveler* pushed clear *Javelin* began to move as well. The larger destroyer wrenched itself violently clear from its moorings and both began to turn their bows away from N'zoth and toward the outer edge of its gravity well, toward the same vector that *Javelin* had emerged from in the first place.

"Raise shields!" Dodonna commanded. "All guns at ready. Prepare a firing solution for both ships. Comm, get me *Starwind*."

"Right away, sir."

The lieutenant was able to pull a link up quickly. Dodonna leaned over the speaker grill and said, "Captain, do you see what's happening?"

"I do, general," Ni-sihl-Nahm responded. "We're moving to intercept but we'll have to cross through the planet's lower orbit. Even then I don't think we'll get there in time."

Dodonna scowled. "Do your best, Ni-sihl. Command, out."

He turned his attention to the tactical holo. Two more destroyers, both *Venator*-class, were still docked at D-pylon and manned by only skeleton crews. The third *Venator*, docked at A-pylon, might be able to scramble a response, but without *Starwind* to back it up, it would never be able to stop both ships.

Behind the holo, through the viewport, space began to light up. Dodonna's breath caught in his chest as *Javelin*- or whatever it was- now safely clear of the refueling pylon, began to rain green turbolaser blasts down on its swollen tanks.

"All hands, brace yourselves!" he shouted, right before the first fuel container lit up like a second sun.

He threw up one hand to cover his eyes and grabbed the tactical console with the other, and even then he was nearly thrown to the deck as the force of the explosion wrenched the rest of the orbital platform. Alarm klaxons wailed and red lights flashed on the command deck.

Then the reports started coming in:

"General, we've lost all contact with E-pylon!"

"Hull breaches reported!"

"Weapons grids alpha through gamma are online and firing. Everything else is not responding, sir."

"Shields are down on pylons C and D, main sections five through seven."

"*Leveler* is making a run for it, General. *Javelin*, she's heading for-"

Dodonna didn't hear the rest. The station shook again, and through the debris field still expanded in front of him, he could see the destroyer's green volleys tear through the hull of the vulnerable Venators still attached to D-pylon.

"General, *Starwind* is approaching."

"Engage!" Dodonna called. "Tell them to fire! Fire!"

He didn't see any more flashes of green. Instead the piercing blue-white of the star destroyer's engines shone brightly through the debris as it turned its tail on N'zoth and started to run.

By the time they got the tactical holo on line, it was almost over. *Leveler* was almost at the edge of N'zoth's gravity well and the destroyer wasn't far behind. *Starwind* was charging ahead at full speed but she wouldn't catch up in time.

Suddenly the comm officer announced, "Sir, we're getting a message from *Javelin*!"

"Put it through." Dodonna wiped sweat from his forehead and staggered over to the comm station.

The voice that came over was scratched with disruption, but it was clearly a woman's. She was saying, "We're very grateful you've offered another ship for our collection. We promise to treat *Leveler* as well as have *Valediction*."

The name of the second ship was familiar, but Dodonna couldn't place it right away.

"Until we meet again, this is Jereveth Syne of the Bavinyar Avengers. It was a pleasure working with you today."

Both ships winked off on the tactical holo. They were gone, escaped to hyperspace.

Nobody bothered to say it; perhaps no one dared to.

"Send an alert to all ships in this sector," Dodonna told the comm officer. "Tell them the bearing those two ships left on. Tell them to try and intercept."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

Dodonna exhaled and slumped forward. Getting in and out of the Koornacht Cluster wasn't easy, but catching ships moving in and out of hyperspace was harder, no matter how limited the possible routes.

After the message was sent, the comm officer said, "General, incoming from *Starwind*."

"On my personal comlink."

Dodonna walked away from the consoles and went close to the viewport. He brought the comlink to his lips and stared out at the spread of debris. Through the drifting wreckage of E-pylon he made out the two wrecked Venators and tried to guess how much of them were salvageable.

"General, this is *Starwind*. Are you there?"

"I'm here, Captain."

"I'm sorry we couldn't stop them, sir. We were too far away to--"

"You have nothing to apologize for, Ni-sihl. I'm sure they timed their escape so you'd be too far away to intervene."

There was a short pause. "What now, sir?"

"Now," he exhaled, "I'll report this to the home fleet."

"Admiral Screed, sir?"

"That's right."

"I see. Good luck, sir."

"Thank you. Move back to the station and began searching through the wreckage. See if there's people or equipment to salvage."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"No. Stand by for further instructions. Command, out."

Dodonna flicked off his comlink, gazed out at the debris, and wondered what Screed would have to say about this. If he were any other commander he'd be worried about losing his job, but Jan Dodonna was a war hero and Terrinald Screed was probably his closest friend in the military after Adar Tallon.

No, he wouldn't be destroyed by this failure, even though he deserved to be.

That meant he was going to have to face Screed with shame in his heart instead of fear, and that was hardly much better.

4

"When we first ran into Pol Haus, we didn't trust him and he didn't trust us. I could tell from the start that he was a smart guy who tried to act thick, and I wasn't about to put my faith in somebody who was so casually deceptive. In the end, though, he was one of the most trustworthy being I ever met. He was steady and practical and without him Whiplash wouldn't have accomplished half the things it managed to do."

Sometimes Jax wondered whether Pol Haus knew every single restaurant, pub, and tapcafe in Imperial City. Every time they met it was always at a different location, and always one of the police prefect's choosing.

That day, they met for breakfast at the Moonwalk, a twenty-four-standard-hour diner in the midlevels. They were outside the Zi-Kree sector, and therefore outside the police prefect's professional stomping grounds. The owner, an overweight Gran in a dirty red apron, gestured for them to take a seat by the window without any sign of his knowing the constable.

At the moment, the Zabrak didn't look like a constable, but then, he rarely did. Slightly overweight himself, with a tattered brown longcoat and unkempt black hair spilling over his horns, Pol Haus looked like a being who'd been out of a job and on the streets since before the Republic fell.

Jax Pavan understood that there were two reasons for Pol Haus' appearance. One was that the man was genuinely lazy about his looks. The second was that he wanted people to underestimate him, which Jax had when they'd first met over a year ago. Back then Jax had been a potential suspect in an artist's murder and he'd had a hard time taking the disheveled, paunched detective seriously. Since he'd learned that, aside from having an acute mind, Haus was also a member of the Whiplash, the same anti-Imperial resistance cell Jax and his compatriots belonged to. A failed attempt to assassinate Emperor Palpatine a month ago had killed off most of the Whiplash leadership, but Haus, Jax, and a few others remained on Coruscant while their leader, Thi Xon Yimmon, was now on Toprawa, building connections with other resistance cells across the galaxy.

In effect, Haus was now the leader of the Coruscant Whiplash, which the police prefect seemed rather uncomfortable with. Nonetheless, Jax gave him all the respect the position deserved, which meant coming alone to whatever new meeting-place the Zabrak had come up with this time.

The Moonwalk was, Jax thought, overall pretty pleasant, at least at the hour of the morning when the sun shone bright through its broad east-facing windows, warming up the whole tabletop while giving a lovely view of the thick rush-hour lines of speeder traffic pulsing through the sky lanes overhead.

After the Gran served them some mediocre caf and waffles with Corellian blueberries (the price was low, so Jax couldn't complain), Pol Haus got down to business.

"I heard about a raid on a Black Sun office two nights ago," he said conversationally, but it was enough to make Jax's chest tighten.

He managed to breathe, then asked, "What kind of raid?"

"A very unusual one. They hit up the Diamond Star entertainment center. Kidnapped the Vigo's live-in lady friend, then washed most of his supply of glitterstim down the drain."

"Diamond Star?" Jax frowned. "That's not in your sector, is it?"

"Close enough for me to hear things."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"Not physically, but that Vigo's going to be lucky if he keeps his job. Or his head. The lady friend is one thing, small-scale, but he just lost two, maybe three months' worth of spice."

"Two *or* three? Oh no. Whatever will Black Sun do without all those illegal drugs to sell?"

"Compared to all the product they push galaxy-wide it's nothing, and you know it," Haus scowled. "The point is, the guy who did this raid just made himself a big enemy."

Jax tried to keep his voice steady. "Do they have any clue who it was?"

"Oh, they have a clue." Haus lowered his voice and held Jax's eyes. "They said he used a green lightsaber."

Jax thought for a second, then said, "I guess that narrows it down a little."

"Narrows it down a *lot*," Haus said. "And don't forget, Black Sun also has connections with the Empire, which means *they're* going to know a Jedi's involved too."

"Yeah," Jax admitted, "That could make things tricky."

"So the real question is," Haus leaned in closer, "Just what in the nine Corellian hells were you *thinking*?"

There was no point in being coy. He said, "We were hired. By a client. He wanted me to rescue his sister, who was being held by the Vigo. Washing down the spice, well... once I saw the stash I couldn't help myself."

"And did anyone in your little band ever stop to think 'Hey, maybe we shouldn't get on Black Sun's *poodoo* list right now?'"

"That was Den, actually."

"I figured. He's actually sensible." Haus crossed his arms over his chest. "Why didn't you listen?"

There were a lot of reasons. Most of them boiled down to the fact that saving a young woman held in drug-addicted slavery to a crime boss was the right thing to do.

Pol Haus probably already figured that much, and Jax knew it wouldn't do any good to try and explain his moral case. He said, "I'm sorry, but I'm a Jedi. This is what I do. I help people, *especially* little people who don't have anyone else to help them."

"Is that what you and your neo-Jedi clan are doing now? Helping anyone who asks?"

"Neo-Jedi?"

"Jax, I know about the two women who've hooked up with you. You're trying to train them as Jedi, aren't you?"

"I'm trying to... I don't know. Honestly. They're both Force-sensitives trying to explore themselves. I'm doing what I can for them."

"You've tried to train an apprentice before."

Jax nodded soberly. His attempt to make a Jedi out of Kajin Savaros, a troubled street boy with nascent Force powers, had ended badly. "These are grown adults. It's different."

"Aren't adults supposed to be harder to train in the Force?"

"They are. But I'm not trying to make Jedi out of them. I'm just trying to help them... reach their potential, whatever that is."

"Well, your training exercise has caught Black Sun's attention, which means the Empire's attention. Are your trainees ready to face Vader yet?"

Jax drew in breath. "No."

"I didn't think so." Haus shook his head. "Well, hopefully they won't get the chance. I've got a mission for you, Jax."

"What kind of mission?"

"One that takes you off-world."

"Are we going to Toprawa?"

"Not even close. I'm sending you to Metellos. I was going to say go alone, but now that you've kicked over the wasp nest you might as well take the rest of your crew with you on a field trip."

"Metellos isn't far," Jax pointed out. It was, in fact, just a short hop from Coruscant, and was generally considered the capital world's poorer, uglier twin. Heavily urbanized and overpopulated but without Coruscant's history and glamor, it was also a good place to go off the radar for a while.

"You're going to be meeting a liaison from another resistance group. They want to test the waters before having face-to-face talks with Yimmon."

"Sounds reasonable." Jax took a sip from his cup, glad that the conversation was moving away from his being dangerously moral.

"This is a big group. An important meeting."

"Are you going to tell me *what* group?"

Haus took a sip of caf and said, "You've heard of Zozridor Slayke and Jereveth Syne."

Jax's jaw dropped. "From Bavinyar?"

It had been almost a year since the so-called Miracle at Bavinyar, where most of the planet's settlers had been evacuated despite an Imperial siege. Details on the battle were scarce and contradictory, but some involved a dread-naught ramming an interdictor cruiser, or a star destroyer getting hijacked.

Regardless, it had given a huge morale boost to resistance groups galaxy-wide.

Pol Haus said, "There are reports, still unverified, that they just hit some shipyards the Imps were building in the Deep Core."

"I can see why that wouldn't make the HoloNet."

"We think Slayke and Syne are still working together. Jax, they've got the biggest anti-Imperial fleet left flying in the galaxy. If we can establish a connection between Whiplash and them, we can take the fight against the Empire to a whole new level."

Jax felt dazed at the thought. All the while he'd limited his expectations to fighting small against the Empire, winning moral victories instead of tactical ones. Now it sounded like they had a chance to do both.

"Do you have the details on when and how to meet their agent?"

"I do."

A data-chip fell from the inside of Haus' sleeve, and with a nimble flick of the thumb it skidded across the table and tapped Jax's glass. He pocketed it as smoothly as he could. At the far side of the room, the Gran owner was talking to a Togorian who had walked in five minutes ago. Jax doubted either of them were Imperial agents, but you could never be sure of anything nowadays.

"Thank you for trusting me with this," Jax said.

Haus shrugged. "Gets you out of my hair for a week."

"We didn't mean to cause trouble."

"I know. You just want to help people." Hause sounded tired, not angry or mocking. "Listen, make sure all your people know the stakes on this. We can't afford for any slip-ups here."

"You can trust my people. All of them."

"Then that's all I need." Haus nodded and pushed himself out of the booth. He tossed a few credit chips on the table and said, "Stay and finish your meal. I have to get to the office."

"I'll see you around," Jax said casually.

"Let me know how your trip goes."

Jax listened to Haus' boots clamp on the floor tile and heard the door slide open and shut, but he didn't turn to watch him go. He looked down at his waffles, now getting cool, and figured he might as well eat them before he, too, went back to his base.

They weren't very good, but he hadn't paid much for them either, so it all evened out. It's not like he'd ever be coming back here anyway.

* * *

Since coming back to Coruscant, we'd been living out of our ship, a *Helix*-class interceptor called *Laranth*. She was a little crowded, what with the addition of two new crew members, but were were already renting its hangar space and didn't have much left over for any kind of apartment.

It helped that one of the five team members was a droid who could swap between large and small bodies with ease, and who didn't need a bunk to sleep in. As it was, Jax had the largest crew cabin, I had another one for myself, Magash and Sacha shared a room (which could be a weird combination) and I-Five, bless him, was satisfied with periodically plugging himself into *Laranth*'s main power core and recharging.

Most of the time, I-Five preferred *not* to go around in his little white astromech shell, or in the shell of Sacha's old podracing pit droid Ducky. No, he much preferred the Human Replica Droid body that made him look like a normal human, a little less than two meters tall and a few years shy of middle age.

Even after spending a lot of time with humans- too much, probably- I sometimes had a hard time reading their facial expressions. Sacha sometimes complained that I-Five's were unnaturally stiff, but my eyes, he looked as real as could be. And the thing is, I never got weirded out when he started wearing the HRD body everyplace he went. I'd known I-Five since he'd been wearing his original clunky protocol droid chassis, but over the years I'd come to think of him as just like any other sentient, and when he started *looking* like one too it didn't weird me out. It just seemed like a natural progression.

So, the day our short sojourn on Coruscant came to its end, I-Five and I were sitting on the bench in *Laranth's* main hold, watching Sacha practice lightsaber tricks.

The lightsaber still had the red crystal and blade of its original owner, but Sacha had fast gotten over her compunction toward using a Sith weapon. She had a white cloth tied around her head and over her eyes while a small spherical practice remote zipped around her. The beams it shot out were low-intensity, not even stunning, which was good, because Sacha still wasn't very good at blocking blasts she couldn't see. Not that I'd be any better. I was still impressed that she managed to 'see' the remote with the Force at all.

As we watched, I leaned in toward I-Five and asked, "You ready to try that yet?"

I-Five moved his human-like arms in front of his face. "Unfortunately, I don't think I'm dexterous enough yet."

"Still not used to the new body, then?"

"I'm plenty used to it, but these model droids can only do so much to mimic human physiology. Still better than my original chassis, though."

"So you're still inferior to a real human?"

"Hardly," the droid snorted. "I'm superior in every way *except* dexterity and you know it."

"Remember when you used to be modest?"

"Not particularly."

"Me neither."

"You know, I can take a look at that chassis if you want me to," Sacha called from the practice floor. The practice probe was slowly circling her at eye-level. She had her blade up vertically and was slowly pivoting on her left heel to follow its movement.

"I'm considering it," I-Five said. "However, I'm getting quite fond of this body. I'd hate to have to permanently swap it out for something else."

"Yeah, like Ducky," I laughed.

"Even *that* would be better than the astromech. You have no idea how *demeaning* it was in there, having to lug *drinks* around for a bunch of alchohol-blinded meat-"

A shot lanced out from the probe. Sacha shifted her lightsaber to catch it but it slipped past her caught and caught her in the upper arm.

"Aw! Blast it!" she rotated her stung shoulder.

"Keep your eye on the ball," I told her.

"I *can't*." She tugged her blindfold. "That's the whole rodding *point*."

"Maybe you should just stick to mechanics."

"Maybe I should," Sacha mumbled, but she didn't lower her weapon or turn away from the probe. The next shot lanced out a moment later, and she deftly caught it with her saber-blade.

I clapped dutifully but she shrugged it off and concen-trated on tracking the probe again. I leaned over to I-Five again and asked, "Where's Magash off to anyway?"

"She said she was off... exploring the terrain, I think she said."

Coruscant was stunningly new for Magash and she like to go exploring. For a second I was worried she might run afoul of some baddies in Coruscant's low-levels. Then I was worried for the baddies.

I didn't need to worry long. After Sacha successfully blocked two more attacks, we heard the sound of boot-steps elsewhere in the ship. Sacha tugged off her blindfold, shut off the droid, and pocketed the lightsaber just in time for Jax and Magash to walk into the hold.

"Well, that didn't take too long," he told Jax.

"Did you check in with Lian'nor like I asked you to?"

"Of course. She's fine. She's with her brother. He said she's no longer..."

"No longer trying to escape," I-Five finished for me.

"Well, that's a start," Sacha sighed. "I was hoping she'd be a little more grateful, but after what Black Sun put her through, it's going to take her a while to break her glitbiter addiction."

"I was hoping her *brother* would be the grateful one," I said under my breath.

"I already told you I wasn't going to take all the money he offered," Jax said. "He's going to need it to give his sister the treatment she'll need."

"Okay, okay," I sighed. I generally considered myself a principled, moral kind of guy, but hanging out with Jedi made me feel all guilty just for trying to be practical now and then. "What did Pol Haus say? Do we have a new job?"

"We do," Jax nodded. "It's good you're all here, because we'll be kicking off Coruscant soon."

"Where to?" Sacha asked. She looked eager for a chance to fly somewhere.

"Metellos."

Her expression fell. I-Five said, "I wasn't expecting to hit up a vacation spot, but why *Metellos*?"

"We're meeting someone very important. Someone who might help us change the course of the entire resistance against the Empire."

"Anything more specific?" Sacha asked.

"We're meeting a representative of Zozridor Slayke and Jereveth Syne."

A silence fell over the hold until I-Five mimicked an impressed whistle.

"We better watch out backs," I said "Those guys are a hot commodity lately. I heard they just hit an Imp installation in the Koornacht Cluster."

"The Imps are *there* now?" Sacha frowned. "What's valuable in Koornacht?"

"Who knows. I heard the Imps have been funneling more people and supplies into the Deep Core lately. Probably making it into a fortress to protect Coruscant and the other Core Worlds."

"It should make for a challenging away mission," Magash spoke for the first time.

It was exactly the kind of thing I expected her to say. You could tell she was looking forward to testing her skills. Since our fast night at the Diamond Star she'd seemed to have picked up a new confidence; she no longer seemed as overwhelmed by the giant city-world as she had just a few weeks before.

Well, I thought, if she was starting to like city-worlds, Metellos was going to change her mind really quick.

"Sacha," Jax said, "What kind of supplies do we need?"

"Um, we'll need to top off fuel. I've been wanting to pick up some replacement cooling rods for the engines too."

"Then go get them. I want to lift out of here in ten hours. Can we do that?"

"No problem, cap'n." Sacha tipped a mock salute and hurried for the door.

As she passed, I-Five rose to his feet in a smooth, easy motion and said, "I'd like to come. We can talk about potential modifications to my chassis on the way."

"Sure thing. Now what I was thinking..."

I could hear them chattering even as they slipped down the hall and out onto the landing ramp, but I turned my attention to Jax. He paced into the center of the hold, still looking a little pensive

"What is it?" Magash asked what I was thinking.

"It's just different." Jax shrugged slightly. "So far we've concentrated ourselves on helping people in need. Even when we've had real offers to take direct hits at the Empire, well, we've always balked at them."

"As well we should have," I reminded him. "Look what happened to Tuden Sal."

The Sakiyan Whiplash leader had gotten himself and most of his allies killed through his obsession with assassinating Palpatine.

Jax said, "I'm worried about putting ourselves in a similar situation again. I don't know what Syne or Slayke will want, but I'm guessing they're after more high-profile targets. If we start working with them, it's going to make the Whiplash a higher-profile target for the Empire."

"Yeah," I said, "It's not like we haven't had to tangle with Vader three times already."

"I know. I'm just being paranoid." Jax shook his head and allowed a wistful smile. "Plus, a part of me likes helping people with little jobs."

"Raiding a Black Sun penthouse is 'little?' Magash asked.

"Okay, point taken," Jax laughed a bit and looked at me. "You don't seem concerned, Den. I'm a little surprised."

Now that he mentioned it, I was too. For some reason taking on the whole Empire worried me less than taking on one little Black Sun Vigo, and this time we weren't even getting paid.

"Never thought I'd say this, but I'm actually a little excited," I admitted. "I wanted to be a journalist so I could witness history. Looks like I might get the chance after all."

* * *

When Pol Haus arrived back at the Zi-Kree Sector Police Department Headquarters, it seemed to be business as usual. There was a short queue of beings, mostly non-humans, lined up before the front kiosks, making reports or requests. With a nod to the guard, he slipped behind the kiosks and went to the back room, where other civilians were sitting down at tables talking with lieutenants and deputies. Some of them had been brought in for question-ing, others had come in to discuss issues with police. The Sector HQ facility also had a number of private rooms for interrogations or more polite questioning, but none of those were in use right now.

The one unusual element was a tall, well-dressed human woman arguing with Mylar Slee, his newest lieutenant. The young Ishori had been brought on to replace Kalibar Droosh, the Bothan

who'd turned out to be in the pay of the Imperial Security Bureau. Droosh had suspected Haus' involvement with Whiplash and Haus hadn't seen it; the only thing that had saved him was a last act of suicidal bravery by Tuden Sal. Haus had reported Droosh killed during an accident investigating the low-levels, which seemed to have sufficed for his immediate superiors, but he doubted the ISB believed it. Half the reason he'd hired Slee as Droosh's replacement was because the young Ishori was green, inexperienced, and easy to read. He was pretty sure Slee wasn't also in ISB's pocket, but even then he had to tread lightly.

Right now, Slee looked pretty overwhelmed by this demanding woman, whoever she was, and when he saw Haus walk past his eyes went wide with relief.

"Prefect Haus!" Slee half-squawked. "This woman wishes to speak with you!"

Normally talking to random civilians off the street was beneath Haus' pay grade, but one look told him this woman was different. There weren't many well-dressed humans in Zi-Kree Sector, especially not ones with the dignified bearing and intense dark glare this woman had. She acted like she belonged in a much better part of town and knew it.

Still standing over their table, he asked, "Miss, what seems to be the problem?"

"I came to report damage to my property," the woman tilted her head back imperiously.

Beings from richer sectors buying up properties in Zi-Kree and renting them out wasn't unusual, but this woman didn't look like a slum lord. "Did you give Lieutenant Slee the address of your property?"

"She's refused to, sir," Slee said. "She says she-"

"I don't trust the police in this sector. Everyone knows this part of town is rank in corruption. I want to speak to someone with authority."

Insulting his department wasn't going to get her on his good side. Haus restrained a sigh and said, "Miss, we can't process your complaint if you won't tell us what we're dealing with. Once you file

a proper report with the lieutenant, I'll be happy to review it. After that, I'll contact you at the location you provide and-"

"Don't take this lightly, Prefect," the woman said icily. "It's likely to whip around and lash you in the face."

Slee swallowed audibly but Haus just looked down at the woman, intrigued. He's gotten pretty good at guessing human ages and she couldn't have been much past thirty standard years. Something told him her haughtiness was an act; even her claim sounded vague and unlikely. This was probably all an excuse to talk to him privately.

She could have been an ISB agent poking around after Droosh's death. They'd probably send someone.

Well, if they wanted to question him, threaten him, or otherwise try and force him to play his hand, he might as well get it over with.

"Lieutenant, escort this woman to Room 6A. I'll be there shortly."

"Very good, Prefect."

Haus didn't look back at them as he walked down the long hallway to his office. He closed the door and finally let out the breath he'd been holding. He went over to his desk, fished out one square metallic pad the size of his palm, and stuffed it in one of his longcoat's many pockets.

He wanted to march in there and talk to her and find out who this woman was, but he forced his whirling thoughts to stop. She could be ISB. She could actually be what she claimed to be, though name-dropping Whiplash made that incredibly unlikely. She could even be a dissident of some kind looking for Whiplash's help, though the group's capacity wasn't close to what it had been before the failed attempt to assassinate Palpatine. The only senior members left after that fiasco were Haus himself and a Togruta poetess named Sheel Mafeen.

If she really was ISB, she's probably try and pretend to be a dissident. Trying to figure out if she was real or faking would be tricky, and if she *was* ISB, he'd have to do his damned best to convince her of his innocence.

He left his office and walked back through the main room. Slee was standing dutifully outside the closed door to one of the interrogation rooms. He gave Slee a word-less nod and the lieutenant slipped away.

Haus paused before opening the door, reached inside his longcoat, and thumbed the switch on the device he'd taken from his office. If the woman was wearing a live-transmission wire, the device would alert him with a high-pitched whine outside the spectrum of human hearing. If she was wearing a simple audio recorder, well, that would be harder to detect, but he could always order a body-search if he got suspicious.

He opened the door and stepped inside. It locked automatically behind him and would only open on his verbal request. The room and small table in front of him were plain. The woman sat, stiff and dignified, in a chair. Haus dropped himself into the opposite one and let himself slump down.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Are you ready to talk now, Prefect?"

"I'm willing to take your report verbally." Haus nodded. "Go ahead."

She folded her hands on the tabletop. "I'm sorry, but I don't have a report to file."

"I was guessing that."

"I'm sorry for the show, Prefect Haus, but I very much wanted to talk to you privately."

Nothing was whining in Haus' ears. He chose to take that as a good sign. "You can start by telling me your name. Your *real* name."

"My name is Sena."

"Sena what? Half a name isn't good enough."

"My name isn't important. Who I represent is."

If she was going to play games, he wasn't. "Who is that, ISB?"

She blinked in what seemed like surprise. He found himself wishing he had Jax Pavan's Force-imbued truth-sensing skills right now.

"I'm not a threat to you, Prefect Haus. My employer greatly admires the work you've been doing."

"What work *have* I been doing? Tell me what you think you know."

"I know you're part of an organization that's been resisting the New Order, called Whiplash. I know you've helped transport many dissidents off Coruscant, including the group's leader, Thi Xon Yimmon."

He opted for a non-denial. "Since you know so much, can you tell me where Yimmon is now?" He watched her eyes closely.

"I'm afraid our sources haven't heard that much."

"Would you care to elaborate on just *who* those sources might be?"

"Dyat Agni sent tentative feelers to us."

"Dyat Agni died a month ago during an attempt to assassinate the Emperor. I can't confirm or deny that."

"It's the truth. We weren't sure whether she cleared that with the rest of Whiplash, but she did it."

Agni had been one of the most zealous members of Whiplash, right along with Tuden Sal. He straightened a little in his seat and said, "Miss Sena, you're going to have to give me something substantial."

He hadn't given her anything yet either. She knew that, and looked at him thoughtfully. She said, "There's really no way for me to prove that I'm *not* an ISB agent, is there?"

"There's no way for me to prove I'm not an ISB plant." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Was this your plan when you came in here? Get me alone so we can stare at each other in mutual distrust?"

She sighed. "I'm sorry. This sort of cloak-and-dagger is... new to me."

Wisely or unwisely, he believed that statement. That meant she wasn't ISB, but also wasn't part of any organized resistance cell. Probably.

"What do you think I can do for you?" he asked.

"I was hoping we could do things for each other."

"Maybe. I need to know who you represent first."

She was hesitant, still. "If I tell you my name, my full name, you'll probably be able to look it up yourself."

It was probably the best he would get right now. "Okay, Miss Sena. Tell me your full name."

"Sena Leikvold Midanyl."

It meant nothing to him, nothing at all. He said, "What do you do when you're not forcing your way into awkward meetings with police prefects?"

"I'm a senatorial aide."

Haus struggled to hide his surprise. There were a lot of members of the Senate who weren't happy with the new Imperial phase the government had taken; not even the HoloNet news service could hide that fact. A lot of those complainers had been stripped of their offices on disloyalty charges and a lot of *those* had ended up in ISB prison facilities, but some still remained, temporarily free.

Free, and probably watched round-the-clock by ISB agents eager to see what other dissidents those senators could flush into the open.

"You shouldn't have come here," he scowled. "Whoever your employer is, he's probably being watched around the clock."

"He is. But we've learned was to get around ISB agents."

He. Well, that narrowed it down slightly. "Listen Miss, ah, Midanyl, whatever you think I am, whatever you think I do, I am a police prefect. My job is to serve the government and protect the daily lives of citizens in this sector, which, as you may have noticed on your way down here, is far from the richest and most glamorous on the planet."

"We also want to help the people of the Empire," Midanyl said evenly. "Together, I think our two, ah, arms of government could help each other. And help *all* the people in the galaxy."

So they'd couch it in that language, then. He said, "If your employer wants to meet with me to discuss better serving the citizens of Imperial Center, I *might* be able to make time for him. My schedule is very busy. And unpredictable."

"So is my employer's, but he's willing to make things work for you."

Haus thought for a moment. It would probably be easier for this senator, whoever he was, to slip out at night. He said, "Have you heard of a place called the Raunchy Mynock?"

Midanyl made a face. "No. I haven't."

"Well, you can look it up. In two nights I'll be having a drink at the booth in the northwest corner of the main room, farthest from the stage. He's free to join me."

"I'll remember that." To her credit, she didn't ask for him to repeat it.

She got to her feet. So did Haus. Before he called for the door to open, he asked her how she wanted to play it.

"You can tell them I was a hysterical rich girl from the upper levels making a big deal out of nothing," she suggested.

"That was the plan. I just wanted to make sure you were okay with it."

So he led her out, and they put on the last act of the little show. Even if she was new to cloak-and-dagger, Midanyl played the part well, acting a little shamed but not shamed enough to put a dent on her upper-class human hauteur. When Lieutenant Slee escorted her out of the office, Haus went back into his office and fired up his personal datapad.

It didn't take him long to access the Senate personnel registry. Just to be careful, he routed his connection through several proxy servers. It was a technique he'd picked up from a slicer who used to live and work in Zi-Kree Sector, and he'd started doing it regularly since the middle of the Clone Wars. He'd felt weird doing it at first, but now that his paranoia had clearly become justified he did it whenever he accessed computers outside the police department's local servers.

Unlike, say, Jax Pavan, Sena Leikvold Midanyl had a very unusual name, and it didn't take him long to find out that she'd been working for the past five years as an aide in the office of Senator Garm Bel Iblis of Corellia, possibly the most vocal and respected critic of the New Order still serving.

"Oh," Haus groaned as he sunk back in his chair. "Oh, you've got to be *kidding* me."

5

"When we first heard of the so-called 'Miracle at Bavinyar,' we were overjoyed, just like anybody else. It was great to see the Emperor get a punch in the nose (or lower body parts), and we hoped it might galvanize the resistance, but we never thought we'd end up personally getting swept up what happened after. At the time, Jereveth Syne and Octavian Grant were names, ideas. Hero and villain, nothing more."

The Tarkus System, located close to the edge of the Ryndellian Sector, was overlooked by all but the most detailed of star charts. Seven planets orbited the white dwarf star, and none of them supported even non-sentient life. Three were lifeless chunks of rock and the other four were gas giants with only a few moons each, also barren. The only item in the star system that had ever caught anyone's passing interest was the wide asteroid belt located between the fourth and fifth planets. Old Republic survey teams had scoured the rocks almost a hundred years ago and found no minerals of value. Neither the Republic nor the new Empire had granted any private companies rights to survey the belt since.

Therefore, the recent rise in spacecraft quietly slipping in and out of the Tarkus System could only have been due to some illegal action.

Once, Vice Admiral Octavian Grant had considered the personal oversight of expeditions to be the work of mere ship

captains. When he'd established his command of the sector fleet at Farstine, he'd overseen the remodeling of its Trade Federation orbital defense platform into a fitting base of operations for the sector's new Imperial owners. He'd even moved into Marath Vooroo's old office and planted down the hand-carved wooden desk passed down the Grant family through generations. Just sitting behind it and watching the planet turn had filled him with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

A year had changed a lot. Now Farstine and the command station seemed like a purgatory he was doomed to waste in forever after his humiliation at Bavinyar, and he took any opportunity to go onto the bridge of a star destroyer and oversee long-range missions.

Some captains might have rankled at his oversight, but thankfully, Amise Griff wasn't one of them. Grant saw much of himself in the young man. Griff, too, was well-bred, having been brought up in the local aristocracy on Brentaal. He comported himself like a captain should, taking full advantage of his personal servant and only interacting with the crew only when the job called for it. Unlike certain other captains Grant had known, he never deigned to sit with the troops in the mess hall and remained an aloof, authoritative figure, as a captain should.

Grant liked to think the man would go far. When he finally escaped his quiet exile at Farstine, he'd be sure to take Griff with him.

At the moment both of them stood at the fore of *Majesty's* bridge and watched the Tarkus Belt slowly resolve ahead of them. The *Gladiator*-class star destroyer was smaller than the more common Venator and Victory models but it was newer and just as capable. Compared to the bigger ships it was maneuverable and versatile, which was why Grant preferred to oversee away missions on it. Few of its type had been produced thus far; the Emperor seemed to prioritize the creation of bigger and more expensive ships, which Grant thought a foolish strategic choice, not that he was in any position to influence policy on Imperial Center.

The asteroid belt ahead of them looked like any belt anywhere in the galaxy. Chunks of rock tumbled in slow orbit around the pale

sun, making distant stars wink as they drifted over them. Grant saw no engine-flares from fleeing spacecraft, no glint of artificial metals in the sea of jagged space rock.

He tried to keep the disappointment from his voice as he told Griff, "Begin active scans on this portion of the belt. Search for heat sources and irregular trace metals."

"Very good, sir," Griff nodded, and went off to oversee the search.

Grant decided to give Griff breathing room and remained at the front of the bridge. He could see his own reflection in the dark transparisteel pane in front of him: a slim body in a pressed gray admiral's uniform, short black hair topping a rounded, narrow-eyed face. This week he'd seen the first specs of gray at his temples, but he couldn't spot any in his translucent reflection now. He was glad for it; he didn't like the thought of growing old here in the backwaters, especially while Jereveth Syne was still ranging freely across the Empire.

He'd learned about the attack on the new shipyards at N'zoth even though the new hadn't been officially promulgated through the state-controlled news networks. Exiled or no, he still had his personal intelligence resources, and they'd relayed to him a blow-by-blow of Syne's raid less than three standard hours after it had happened.

The news networks hadn't said anything about Bainyvar ten months ago, though it hadn't stopped word from traveling through unofficial means. Reports of Syne's miraculous evacuation of most of her little world's inhabitants, despite Grant's siege, had been passed around the higher levels of the Imperial Navy, but even most of those had carefully neglected the critical event that made Syne's miracle possible in the first place. The failure of the siege was bad enough for morale; if everyone knew that a squadron of elite clone troopers had mutinied and helped the enemy hijack and brand-new star destroyer, it could create a crisis in the ranks.

While Grant understood the reasoning behind keeping *Valediction's* capture secret, he'd still advised against it. Syne was a threat, that ship was most definitely a threat, and not telling senior

commanders that the enemy might sail right amidst their fleets with a friendly flag was simply asking for the attack that had just befallen N'zoth.

He wasn't foolish enough to think that Syne showing her head again was going to make the Emperor suddenly plead for Octavian Grant to hunt her down. He'd lost Imperial Center's trust after Bavinyar and he'd need something special to get it back.

He saw Griff's reflection approach his own. "Admiral, we have not located any energy readings indicative of spacecraft."

Grant watched his reflection scowl. "What about unusual mineral readings?"

"Possibly, sir. We seem to have located one large asteroid which shows signs of turidium alloys."

Grant frowned. "That isn't native to this asteroid belt, is it?"

"Not according to the existing survey reports, sir."

"Take us in. Slowly."

"Understood, sir. I'll raise shields and keep weapons at yellow alert."

Griff's reflection spun on its heel and marched back to the crew pit. Grant leaned closer and tried to make out anything artificial in the belt as *Majesty's* prow slid into the field of drifting space-rock. The scanners were more reliable than his eyes, of course, but after coming this far he wanted to see things for himself.

After a minute, Griff walked back to him and said, "Admiral, active scans indicate durasteel and ferrocrete constructions in the indicated asteroid."

"But no heat signatures?"

"No, sir."

"A mining colony, probably. Burrowed into the rock. Their defensives should be minimal, but proceed with caution."

"Very good, sir."

Grant kept his eyes on the viewport. He could finally see it up ahead; the smooth surfaces of durasteel bunkers reflected the blue-white light of the distant sun as the asteroid slowly rotated in space.

"Captain," he said, "Hail them."

"Yes, sir."

No reply came at first and Grant wondered if the mining station hadn't been abandoned long ago. That didn't fit with the recent increase of ships through the Tarkus System, however. Telemetry reports on those ships indicated they were flying in and out of this stretch of the belt, but it was entirely possible they had relocated to another portion. If so, it could take days to scour the rocks and find their new base.

"Captain," the tactical lieutenant said, "The asteroid has raised particle shields."

No scouring then, good. Grant and Griff converged at the tactical station, where the main hologram displayed the oval-shaped asteroid, the shield raised around it, and flecks of starfighters that were disgorging from hidden hangars in several surrounding rocks.

"Guns, target those launching stations and destroy them," Grant said. "Send out a fighter screen."

"What kind of ships are they, Lieutenant?" asked Griff.

"Different types, sir. I'm reading Z-95s, R-41s, Y-wings."

"Illegals of some kind, clearly." Griff looked at his admiral. "Should we destroy the mining station as well, sir?"

Grant was tempted, but shook his head. "All we know says this belt is devoid of valuable minerals. If these scroungers have found something worthwhile I'd like to know what it is."

"Of course, sir."

Grant turned to the forward viewport to see lances of green turbolaser energy strike the smaller asteroids adjacent to the mining station. They had apparently been left unshielded, because they exploded with the first volleys.

"Have we received any reply to our hails?" Griff asked the comm station.

"Negative, captain."

"Call them again," Grant said. "Tell them we'll destroy them if they don't reply."

Griff frowned for a moment, then understood. The miners' motley collection of starfighters seemed hesitant to charge *Majesty*, even as Griff's vessel disgorged two squadrons of Eta-2 fighters.

Some of the starfighters outright attempted to run; only a handful tried to engage the Imperial ships directly. Grant watched red and green lasers flash through the viewport, punctuated by a handful of small explosions.

"These men are scavengers and pirates," Grant said. "They're not willing to die for their prize."

"Sirs," the comm officer said, "We're getting a reply from the mining base."

"Route it to me directly," Grant raised his comlink to his mouth, then said, "Unidentified miners, this is Admiral Octavian Grant. You are operating illegally in Imperial space as I'm sure you know. If you do not lay down arms immediately we will destroy you."

The reply came in some guttural Huttese. Grant frowned. Whatever gibbering alien was talking to him might have been employed by the Hutts, or might not; the tongue was the standard for sub-human lowlifes throughout the galaxy.

"If possible, please speak Basic," he said evenly. "I will not negotiate in Huttese."

There was a pause; then a voice said, "No-a problema. I canna do Basic too. Whata you want?"

Wondering whether the comm line was bad or the speaker was just an imbecile, Grant repeated, "Your mine is operating illegally. If you do not lay down arms we will destroy your main mining station as we've already destroyed your other asteroids."

After a pause, the voice said, "Whata you *want*, *sleemo*? You want trallium? It all yours. Just let us go."

"Sir," Griff whispered, "They could have booby-traps in the mine set to go off once they leave."

Grant had just thought the same thing. "No ships will be allowed to leave the system without my authorization. If any ships attempt to flee they will be destroyed."

"So what you want, ha? You wanta surrender? Fine. I lay down arms. Ora wings, whatever you want, ha? Listen, we gotta good trallium deposits here. All over belt, inna fact. I show you them. Then maybe I geta outta here with no jail, ha?"

Even with the bluster and broken Basic, Grant could tell the alien was scared.

"We will negotiate terms when our boarding parties arrive. Prepare for our shuttles. Grant, out."

As he flicked off the comlink and placed it in his pocket, he turned to Griff and said, "Captain, give me three squads of your best men. Enlisted, not clones. Prepare shuttles for us."

"Us, sir? Are you sure that's safe?"

Not as safe as sitting behind his desk at Farstine Station, which was rather the point. "I'll be all right. I'd like to inspect this facility with my own eyes. Captain Griff, the bridge is yours."

As he turned on his heel and walked off the bridge, Grant felt something close to excitement. A plan was forming in his head, one that might just get him back where he belonged.

* * *

Leveler was a fine addition to the fleet assembled in orbit around one of the many old red stars in the Koornacht Cluster, where the radiation hid them from notice of all but a direct close-range sensor sweep. The assault carrier's broad pale hull was a nice match with the larger *Valediction* and the smaller Sullustan fleet carrier *Fat Bastard*. Standing in contrast to those three was the long, segmented body of the commandeered Separatist battleship *Freedom Song*. The rest of the fleet was rounded out by various support vessels, ranging from the light cruiser *Plooriod Bodkin* to the corvette *Scarlet Thranta*, whose bright red hull marked its origin as a Judicial Forces vessel from another time.

It was probably the most motley fighting fleet in the galaxy, and probably the only one capable of giving the Empire a punch in the nose.

Despite their raid on N'zoth, nobody thought they could do more than punch on the nose. A'Sharad Hett could feel the initial thrill and elation of the beings around him dim in the Force without entirely going away. The cold reality of their situation was

setting in once more, and the new sight of *Leveler* among the fleet could only warm them so much.

For Hett, though, victory at N'zoth was ancillary. The real victory was being together with Jereveth Syne and their child again.

Jadesei Syne was less than two months old. She was a small, pale, hairless ball of flesh and when he held her in his arms she squirmed and flexed tiny fingers and sometimes made little high-pitched wailing sounds. She was probably indistinguishable from any other two-month-old human baby in the galaxy, but when A'Sharad Hett looked into her eyes (narrow and dark, like her mother's) he felt like he was staring through a portal into all the things the Jedi had never taught him.

He wondered if his father had seen the same thing in his eyes, so long ago, beneath Tatooine's two hot suns. The Sharad Hett of his memory possessed a conviction and vitality that the Jedi of the Temple had not. For most of his career as a Knight and later a Master, he had struggled alternately with pushing his passions away and tentatively embracing them. For so long the thought of his father, wise and loving, had been connected with his angry desire to avenge the man's death, and the only escape from those conflicted feelings had been to force a strict asceticism upon himself.

All the while he'd known that he had somehow given up that which had made his father a great man, but when the Clone Wars began, all his personal inner conflicts had been put aside for the sake of survival.

Survival was an issue now more than ever, but Jereveth Syne had changed everything else. She was not a warm person. She did not go out of her way to charm other people. In her youth, in peacetime, she may have been different, but war and grief had made her cold. In those qualities A'Sharad Hett had seen some mirror of himself, as she'd seen in him, and for a while he'd provided her with solace and she'd given him that much and more: a bridge to experiences he'd given up hoping for a long time ago and an escape from the life he'd never truly been comfortable in, not so long as his father's memory remained.

The child, though, was a step beyond the pale for either of them.

When Slayke returned her to *Valediction* after the battle, they took her to the quarters that had once belonged to the ship's Imperial captain, sat side-by-side on his bunk, and stared at their daughter in quiet marvel.

They held her for a time in silence, passing her between them, before Hett said, "I wonder if she'll have sensitivity to the Force."

"Does it pass through families?" Syne asked as she stared down at Jadesei. The habitual tension had dissolved from her expression; she looked younger whenever she had the child in her arms.

"It did through mine. In most cases, well, I imagine it was hard to tell."

"Of course."

Syne ran a finger-tip gently across the baby's smooth forehead. Jadesei groped for her mother's hand with weak, stubby fingers. Syne let herself be caught and smiled at the tickling sensation. She'd never smiled like that before, open and free.

"Do you want to train her in the Force?" Syne asked. She didn't say 'Jedi.' She knew the conflicted feelings that word gave Hett, and she rarely used it.

"My father trained me as far as he could."

"And you'd like to do the same for her?"

He'd thought about that, which itself had been one of the marvels Jadesei had brought to his life. Until her birth had hadn't allowed himself to think beyond the next week. Now he found himself dreaming up plans her life and his own for years to come. It was the sort of attachment his masters had already warned him against, but at the moment he couldn't think of them as anything but fools to deny themselves the love he felt for Syne and their daughter. His love felt like more than just a candle to hold back the night; it felt like a fire to ignite the stars.

"If she can touch the Force she deserves to learn how to use it best she can," Hett said. "But to give her proper training is... Something I'm not sure I can provide."

"Can or should?" Syne asked softly.

He wasn't sure. The way the old Jedi had conducted themselves had gotten them killed. Their aloof monasticism and blind service to a corrupt state had turned them into objects of hate and fear that half the galaxy seemed glad to see exterminated. It was impossible to deny that. The only Jedi he'd yet met who *had* escaped the Purge had been Master Altis and his pariah sect, which seemed only further evidence of the fact.

Altis and, perhaps, Anakin Skywalker. Sometimes, when he looked at Jadesei in his arms or Jereveth when she slept and peace softened her face, he totally forgot the vision he'd had when floating through space over Belsavis, his vision of *another* man floating in space who'd reminded him so very much of the troubled Jedi Knight he'd known in the Clone Wars.

The scowl on that man's face, made of equal parts anger and loss, had seemed a perfect recreation of Anakin's as he told a Jedi Master in a Tusken face-mask what he'd done to the ones who had killed his mother. It was only because Hett knew similar loss, and anger, that he hadn't reported Anakin's horrible deed to the Jedi Council.

At Belsavis he'd been convinced that the man in his vision was a son, or some other descendant, of Anakin Skywalker. Now a year had passed. It had given him a child but no Force-visions, and his conviction about Skywalker had faded to a shadow. Still, sometimes, he wondered if Skywalker wasn't out there still, fighting and loving in a way Kenobi and the other Masters had never taught him to.

He sometimes wondered how much he had in common with that other troubled Jedi from Tatooine.

And yet the life his father had lived, of passion and devotion to a personal cause, had ended in destruction. Likely Anakin's had too. There had to be another way for a Force-user to live rightly in a dangerous galaxy; he just couldn't see it.

He didn't have to explain that to Syne, just like she didn't have to explain her feelings to him. She placed a hand softly on his arm and said, "We'll have plenty of time to figure this out. I promise."

She almost sounded confident. Syne was normally too much a realist for optimism, but Jadesei was softening her hard edges.

"What do you intend to do with our new prize?" he asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," she admitted. "The prize was not the point of that raid, A'Sharad."

"You wanted to announce our presence to the Empire."

"Partially. I also wanted to test our intelligence and make sure those stolen ship identification codes worked. A shame we can't use them anymore."

"I'm sure they'll assign new ones to all ships," Hett nodded. "Still, it worked when we needed it."

"You sound surprised, A'Sharad." She glanced at him with a sly smile.

"I was skeptical," he admitted.

"So was Avit, yet you pulled it off. The two of you make a fine team."

"I suppose," Hett allowed. He got along better with Madrisk than he did with old Yvolton, who seemed unable to put aside his life-long suspicion of Force-users. "Why did you insist on attacking N'zoth?"

"It was a new base. Poorly defended."

"It was also hard to get to, and get out of. There's not many routes out of Koornacht. If *Javelin* had showed up early, or if they'd had other ships in the next hyperspace corridor, we'd have been wrecked."

"But they didn't, and our victory is all the more rewarding."

He frowned. It wasn't like her to be flippant about death, especially when she was holding their child.

Her little smile softened and she said, "A'Sharad, I've had my eye on N'zoth for months. Even when I was busy with other things." She stroked Jadesei's head; the baby gurgled. "All of our intelligence indicates that the Imperials have been quietly building up supplies and ships in the Deep Core over the past year."

"They've been having build-ups everywhere."

"I know, but the Deep Core is different. It's not near any Separatist hold-out regions. It's not near *anything*. I suspect what

they're building in the Koornacht Cluster is the tip of something much bigger."

Hett frowned. "Like what?"

"I do not know, but Slayke's been monitoring every channel we've sliced into. The way they redistribute ships and supplies after our attack in the region should be more interesting. We're scheduled to meet with him about it later today."

"Are we going over there or is he coming here?"

"I believe it is our turn to visit *Freedom Song*."

Hett sighed and reached toward Jadesei. The child fumbled out and grabbed his thumb with five fingers. Fair was fair; they'd made a point to split things as evenly as possible with Slayke. It just seemed wrong to leave his daughter again after coming back to her.

"It will only be for a short time," Syne reminded him. "I'm sure Sajin will watch over her while we're gone."

"I know," he admitted. "It's still hard."

"Think of her as incentive to come home from work each day."

She talked like they were some normal married couple working normal jobs in a normal galaxy. He glanced at her and saw another wry smile.

"Believe me," he said, "She's more than enough."

* * *

Octavian Grant was mildly surprised by how easily the two assault shuttles entered the mining base's hangar. He'd been anticipating some kind of ploy on the part of his hosts: hidden weapon emplacements, armed troops on the hangar deck, maybe some trick with the shields. The shuttles. However, landed without incident, and three full squads of armored troops poured down the landing ramps and spread out across the deck.

As per orders, the troops made sure the deck was secure. After that, two squads began to search the rest of the facility while the last remained in the hangar to guard the shuttles and hold the small party that had been waiting for their arrival.

It was only after everything was secure that Grant stepped out of the shuttle. The commandos stood around a small cluster of aliens. Grant spotted two Niktos, a Klatooinan, a Rodian, and two fierce-looking Shistavanen. At the center of the group was one green-skinned Toydarian. A truly ugly creature, the Toydarian's bloated gourd-shaped body was held aloft by the noisy flapping of two undersized wings. As Grant approached it watched him with two curious, dark little eyes planted on either side of its bulging, trunk-like nose.

"Ha, you musta be Admiral Grant!" the Toydarian said. It hovered a little closer but two commandos stepped in its path.

"You've checked them for weapons?" Grant asked the lead commando.

"Of course, sir."

"Then let him pass. Keep the others corralled."

The commandos stepped aside and let the Toydarian flap its way over to Grant. They stood facing each other midway between the shuttles and the group of guards and prisoners. At this distance they could speak privately.

"So, you wanta know about this mining facility, ha?" the Toydarian asked.

"You said you've been finding trallium ore in this belt?"

"Thatsa right. Trallium is *very* valuable, very useful for-"

"It is useful for the creation of multiple types of weapons, which is why its extraction is carefully regulated by the government. How did you find it?"

"Well, I no know, not exactly. During the war, I hear, someone found some deposits. Since then, well, we didn't wanta apply for a permit, pateesa, so..."

"Who is running this mining operation?"

"Youra looking at the operations manager. Calla me Vallo."

"And for whom do *you* work?"

The creature chuckled. "Aruk the Hutt."

Grant knew the name. Aruk Besadii was one of the most powerful of the slug-like gangsters from Nal Hutta. Apparently the alien thought that might earn it some protection; Grant could think

of no other reason why a criminal, caught red-handed by the Empire, would be so calm.

"Mister Vallo, what do you think is going to happen here?"

"*Pateesa*, I been caught by people lika you since the Republic. I'ma confident we can come to some... *arrangement*." It rubbed its green claws together.

"You seem to think you can exchange all your information about the mines for an escape ticket. What happens to you then? Aruk won't be pleased to hear you gave up his mining operation without a fight."

"If Aruk don't wanta me, fine," the Toydarian chuckled. "Jiliac be sure to take me, ha?"

"Mister Vallo, you may not have noticed, but we are an Empire now, *not* a Republic. We do not bend rules. We do not look the other way when some criminal slips us a few credits. The Empire means law and order, Mister Vallo, and those who fragrantly violate the law *will* be punished severely."

It should have been true. Under normal circumstances Grant would have taken the information he needed from this repulsive alien and thrown it and the rest of its scum into prison. It was what their kind deserved.

At the moment, though, he needed them.

His speech put a little fear on the Toydarian's ugly face, but not enough. It said, "Admiral, trusta me, I am very able to help you. Withouta my information, you have *no* chance of-"

"My commandos are raiding your facility now. They're pulling your precious information from your computers as we speak."

The alien chuckled. "You don't think I taka precautions? I no fool, Admiral."

He probably wasn't bluffing. It had taken Grant's team a good fifteen standard minutes to assemble, leave *Majesty*, and fly to the mining station. That was more than enough time for the Toydarian to booby-trap or extra-encrypt his files. The latter issue could be solved with time; the first could not.

It didn't matter. Grant was planning on giving him what he wanted anyway. The extra drama just made this farce seem more authentic.

"I am going to present another option to you, Mister Vallo," Grant said.

"I'ma all ears, so to say." The Toydarian tapped the flat side of its head.

"Mister Vallo, I am offering a chance for you and all of your people to remain here on this mining facility and continue your work."

The alien looked a confused. "What is that, ha? Whata you mean?"

"You may keep operating exactly as you have been, only instead of working for Aruk the Hutt, you work for me. Am I clear?"

The Toydarian tilted its head. "You meana we work for the Empire?"

"You work for *me*. The nature of our arrangement, of course, must be kept very quiet. Nonetheless, I assure you I will use my resources to protect you from any reprisals from Aruk."

"Ah, I see now. I see you good, Admiral." Its eyes narrowed. "I glad to see some things haven't changed, ha?"

Grant fought a scowl. What he was doing was a lot of things, all of them bad. He was betraying his uniform, betraying his family's honor, and disgracing the Empire by willingly involving himself with a criminal enterprise.

No, it wasn't involvement, it was outright taking one over. With one simple conversation he'd crossed the line from fleet officer to petty criminal, the kind his ancestors on Fondor had spent generations bringing harsh justice to.

But it was his best chance of getting out of exile, and in the face of that, traditional and niggling moral qualms dissolved with frightening ease.

He and Vallo spent several more minutes talking over the specifics of their arrangement. When they were done, the Toydarian extended one green claw toward Grant. He tried to conceal his

distaste and glanced over the alien's wings at the commandos and prisoners watching them from across the deck.

"My word is sufficient," he said softly. "We're done here, Mr. Vallo."

"Okay, okay." The Toydarian took its claw away. "You keep in touch, ha?"

"That will be no problem."

Grant stepped away from the alien and walked back toward his men. After a short, terse conversation with the commando leader, he had his men recalled from searching the mining facility. With obvious reluctance, the commandos boarded the shuttles with Grant and left the asteroid.

When they arrived back on *Majesty*, Grant commed the bridge and told Captain Griff to leave the system before going to his personal quarters. He was unsurprised when, shortly after the jump to hyperspace, Griff appeared on his doorstep.

Because he'd been expecting it, Grant had answers prepared for the young captain's confused questions. He liked Griff but he wasn't going to tell him the truth, not about this. For now, it would be kept only between him and the Toydarian back on the asteroid.

After he'd heard it all, Griff still seemed confused. "I don't understand how this... alien company could have gotten a contract to mine without us knowing."

"As I understand it, the contract was made through the civilian oversector government on Eriadu."

"Still, sir, they should have informed us."

"You're right, and when we're back at Farstine, I'm going to have a talk with Moff Tarkin. However, that's nothing for you to concern yourself with, Captain Griff."

"I understand, sir. I don't mean to overstep my bounds."

Grant looked at the captain carefully. Griff was a man who understood the importance of rank, position, and knowing your place, but he also wasn't a fool. Even with Grant's assurance he knew something was wrong.

Grant gave a little sigh and added, "I don't know who specifically made this arrangement, Captain, but I assure you I will

look into it. Frankly, this doesn't seem above the level to me either. I suspect some mid-level bureaucrat somewhere thought he could cut a deal for his own benefit."

"It's disgraceful, sir," Griff said. Honest anger crept into his voice. "This isn't the Republic any more. The Empire should be above this kind of corruption. I can't believe it's being tolerated."

"I completely agree. That's why I'll look into it."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir." He didn't ask to be kept informed. He still knew his place.

After Griff saluted, spun on his heel, and crisply marched out, Grant pulled the vice admiral's rank badge off his chest and looked at it. He ran his thumb over its red-and-blue squares and felt their hard edges. He hoped to get a new one soon.

After they got back to Farstine, he would start planning a journey to the Core, but that was something Griff didn't have to know.

He wouldn't be bringing the good captain with him. Not on that trip, anyway.

* * *

Zozridor Slayke, ex-Judicial officer, founder of the Republican militia Sons and Daughters of Liberty, and captain of *Freedom Song*, was a big crimson bear of a man. He sat on the opposite side of the small circular table from Hett and Syne, occasionally scratching his shaggy beard and rattling off a summary of the reports he'd given them on datapads.

"So basically," he said, "It looks like most of the ships the Imps are sending to recover and resupply to shipyard at N'zoth are coming in from a vector indicating an arrival from Anaxes. The thing is, our spies haven't picked up much movement from the Home Fleet."

"So what does that mean?" Syne asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Slayke shrugged. "My guess is that they're sending ships from some other base in the Deep Core,

but having them re-route so it looks to everybody else that they're coming from Anaxes."

"They're trying to keep a secret," Hett said.

"Maybe. Or maybe there's some perfectly logical explanation we haven't picked up on. I'm getting most of our intel from a few old friends from the Judicial Forces, plus low-ranking Imps we've bribed into sharing scraps of info."

"That's dangerous," Syne said. "You can't trust men who can be bought."

"We don't. But they think they're working for Black Sun, or the Hutts, or some other lovely slimeball association, not noble anti-Imp crusaders, so I'm not that worried about getting played."

"Where are you getting the money to bribe them?" Hett asked.

Slayke cocked a red eyebrow, like he was asking if they *really* wanted to know.

Hett shook his head. The partnership between Slayke and Syne was generally an easy one, especially considering that they'd fought on opposite sides during the Clone Wars. Each commander had a certain domain, and while they shared planning and information for critical operations like the raid at N'zoth, what was shared or not was ultimately at each commander's discretion.

He had a feeling the residual Jedi in him wouldn't like where Slayke got the money anyway.

Slayke leaned forward; his heavy shoulders hunched over the table. "We've reminded the Imps we're still kicking, which means we're going to have to play it more serious now. We're going to need to up our intel game if we want to stay three steps ahead of the enemy."

"You sound like you have something in mind," Syne said.

"Right you are." Slayke smiled. "One of my agents in the field has gotten an interesting offer. There's a group out there calling itself Whiplash that's been running anti-Imperial activities, mostly on Coruscant, but other places too."

"It sounds familiar." Hett tried to recall some of the past intel reports he'd read.

"They've mostly avoided actual offensive attacks and stuck to sheltering fugitives, moving supplies secretly, that sort of thing. Since they move quietly, they've also been putting together a good intel network."

"And you want to ally with them." Hett said.

"Dead on, my friend. We've only talked through encrypted messages so far, but now they want to meet face-to-face. They were actually the ones who suggested it, which makes me a little edgy, to be honest."

"You want someone to sense their intentions?" Hett asked. A heavy feeling settled in his gut; there was only one place this was going.

"Frankly, Mister Hett, if we have anyone who's good for a trip like this, it's you."

He glanced at Syne, hoping she had some good reason for him to stay with the fleet; at least, a good reason she could give Slayke.

Instead she asked, "Where is this meeting set to take place?"

"Metellos."

It wasn't that far, and it wasn't a complete Imp nest either. Hett was disappointed; it made the offer harder to refuse.

"Captain," Hett said, "Can Madam Syne and I speak alone for a moment?"

"Of course." Slayke started to rise but Hett shook his head and got to his feet. Syne, looking only slightly perturbed, followed him out into the hallway.

"A'Sharad," she said, "Please don't make this difficult. He's right. You'd be the best person to sense the envoy's intentions."

"I just got back to Jadesei. I don't want to leave again."

"You don't trust me to protect her?" she cocked her head.

"It's not that. You know it." He exhaled. "This makes me look selfish, doesn't it?"

"No." She placed a hand on his arm. "It makes you look like a good father."

"*Look* like?"

"The point is, A'Sharad, I don't think Slayke will hold it against you."

He didn't particularly care what Slayke thought of him, not now.

She said, "Compared to raiding an Imperial shipyard, A'Sharad, this should be easy."

"I know that."

"Then you have my full confidence." She popped onto her toes and kissed him once on the cheek. Her hand lingered against his face, tracing his tattoos with her thumb.

She asked, "What did your father do in these situations, A'Sharad?"

"He did the right thing. It got him killed."

Syne nodded. "That's why we learn from our fathers, but we don't emulate them. Not in everything."

"That's the harder part," he said. "Not making their mistakes."

It felt strange, just admitting that Sharad Hett had flaws. During all those years of ascetic Jedi life he'd never openly spoken about his father's failings. Even now it felt disrespectful.

"If you want an easy life, you should go back to Tatooine and try moisture farming."

He forced a laugh. "Too boring. If I go back to Tatooine I'd rather run around with Tusks again."

"Then it's a good thing you have something to come home to."

"It is." He cupped her hand with his own and gently pulled it down. "Come on. We've kept Slayke waiting long enough."

"I'll get back as soon as I can," he said seriously.

"I never expected anything less."

"We're in this together. All the way to the end." He bent down, kissed her forehead.

She nodded and withdrew her hand from his. For a moment he felt lost without it. Then he followed her back into the conference room.

6

"Back then, we were just trying to hurt the Empire in small ways, because small means were all we had. I'd have never imagined what the Rebel Alliance became. At the time the fight against the Empire was all from a bunch of different actors with different goals and agendas and I was frankly too cynical to think that all those actors could somehow pull together to topple something as great and awful as Palpatine's New Order. Well, sometimes it's good being wrong."

The next time his emperor summoned him, it felt like a cold hand upon his brow.

That is to say, it felt like the memory of a touch, because no hands touched the face of Darth Vader, and even if they did, he would barely have been able to feel it against the charred, cracked skin that wrapped around his body, just the first layer of armor that separated him from the fresh air and soft sensations that other beings, even those like Inquisitor Jerec, were capable of feeling.

Vader was in the middle of overseeing the construction of an additional wing to the Imperial Palace, meant for the training of his elite 501st commando unit, when he felt the Emperor's touch. He quickly excused himself and made his way toward the throne room. He could feel waves of relief ripple off the work crew he left behind.

He took a speeder from the work site, and landed it as close as possible to the throne room. From that landing pad it was still a

twenty-minute walk, and when he arrived at the anteroom he was grateful not to find Jerec or anyone else waiting there besides the Emperor's four crimson guards.

Vader reached out with the Force, through the heavy doors, and announced his presence to the man waiting beyond. He felt no response, but the door slid open.

He walked down the red carpet toward the Emperor's throne. The sun was going down over Imperial City and the myriad skyscrapers were lighting up. A memory brushed Vader's mind, the memory of another life, where a boy from a dusty desert world had first laid eyes on a city never ended and had been shocked and thrilled and overwhelmed beyond speech.

The memory was as gone as quickly as it came. Vader was glad for that. He dropped on one knee in front of his Emperor and said, "Why have you summoned me, My Master?"

"I have come into some information, Lord Vader," the creature on the throne said. "It seems that there was an *incident* at Black Sun facility several nights ago. It appears that they were raided and robbed by a human male using a green lightsaber."

Vader's thought immediately flashed back to Kantaros Station and his last confrontation with Jax Pavan. He was surprised that the young Jedi had fled back to Coruscant, of all the places in the galaxy.

That was assuming, of course, that the Jedi who raided Black Sun was Jax Pavan.

"How did you learn this, my Lord?"

"The information was provided to me by a young Black Sun lieutenant called Xizor."

Vader was unfamiliar with the name. "Is this the same Vigo who was robbed?"

"No. It seems that was... a different man." He could hear the brittle smile on the Emperor's face. Black Sun's creativity in dealing with failures was rumored to surpass the Emperor's own.

"I will investigate, my Lord."

"See that you do. And, Lord Vader, I recommend you look deeply into this Jedi's associates."

Vader lifted his head slightly to look at the figure nearly buried in black robes. "My Lord, do you believe this Jedi is Jax Pavan?"

"Do you, Lord Vader?"

He didn't know. He tried to reach out with the Force toward some hint of his fate. He had encountered Pavan three times already, and each time failed to destroy the young Jedi who'd barely had time to complete his training. This young Jedi had once been a friend to Anakin Skywalker, or as close to a friend as Anakin had allowed. As time went on, and he failed again and again to bring Pavan down, that old friendship had loomed more and more in his thoughts. What had begun as memories of a dead man had moved even to his dreams, taunting him with their stunning immediacy.

But when he asked the Force if Pavan was indeed on Coruscant again, he felt no reply.

"I will determine the identity of this Jedi, Master."

"I am sure you will, Lord Vader. And if you can use this Jedi to draw out any allies he may still have in Coruscant's resistance cells, so much the better."

He dipped his head forward again in a bow. "I will eliminate all traces of Whiplash and their allies on Imperial Center, my Lord."

"You have my full trust." Like everything Darth Sidious said, there was a hint of mocking to it.

"Is there anything else, my Lord?"

"No. You may go now."

Vader rose to his feet, but before turning to leave he asked, "Master, what is the status of the Jedi Masters being transported to Prakith?"

"There vessel has been proceeding carefully into the Core. Lord Jerec tells me they will be arriving within two days."

He wanted to ask who would be handling the prisoners when they arrived, but he did not want to seem cloying or needy before his Emperor. In the end, that was all the information he needed anyway.

He bowed one last time, then turned and walked quickly down the red carpet, away from the throne and the falling night. If he was going to prove his worth to the Emperor by eliminating Jax Pavan

and his Whiplash organization, he was going to need assistance, the kind that High Inquisitor Jerec had wisely cultivated: the kind that was capable, loyal, and totally under his heel.

He had an idea of where to start. He made his way as quickly as he could to the Inquisitors' training grounds, deep in the belly of the Palace.

* * *

When ranking the Zi-Kree's sector's nightlife establishments for respectability, safety, and quality of service, the Raunchy Mynock was at the bottom of every list. Even ISB agents masquerading as low-lives (or Imperial Senat-orial aides) would think twice about stepping through its doors.

That was why it had jumped to the front of Pol Haus' list of where to meet Senator Bel Iblis, or to spring an ISB trap, whatever it turned out to be. If a little danger was enough to scare away the Senator, well, he wasn't half as serious about opposing the Emperor as he claimed. If he was being set up to meet an ISB agent, it wouldn't be hard to make sure that agent never reported back to his superiors.

Pol Haus settled down at the booth he told Midanyl he'd be in and ordered a drink. He nursed it, very slowly, and watched with vague interest as a trio of Zeltron women took to the stage on the far side of the room. They started their dance with barely any clothes on and were wearing none at all when his client stepped into the room.

The man was tall and broad-shouldered and his face and upper body were hidden within the folds of a black cloak, but Haus could tell from his posture and by the way he walked that he was human. The man made a straight line toward Haus's booth.

Haus reached under the table and triggered the bug-detector in his pocket. Then, hand still hidden, he shifted to the Czerka hold-out blaster tied to his left thigh. He carefully slid the blaster out of its holster and, without looking at it, flicked the safety off.

The man sat down at his booth. He didn't take off his hood or even tilt his head back to let Haus get a look at his face.

The bug-detector wasn't going off, though, which was a good sign.

"Do you always walk up the stranger's tables and sit down without asking?" Haus asked evenly.

"When they request my company, I do."

"Who requested you? I've never met you."

"You've met a mutual friend."

The voice was deep, slightly gravelly. It sounded like the Garm Bel Iblis he'd seen and heard on news broadcasts but he couldn't be sure, especially without seeing the face.

"Did you bring her, or did you come alone?"

"She's watching my back."

"Good. Then we're both covered," Haus lied.

He hadn't trusted his police officers even before Droosh turned out to be a spy, and he hadn't wanted to bring anyone in Whiplash in on this, not yet. If this man really was Senator Bel Iblis, this was the most important and dangerous meeting in the organization's history. For the safety of Jax, Sheel, and others, he was going to play this close to his chest.

He asked, "How can I be sure you are who your associate said you are?"

"Because I give you my word."

A cheer went up from the far side of the room as the three Zeltron women started to twine together in a tangle of naked pink limbs.

Pointedly ignoring them, Haus said, "You might want to look around. A man's word isn't worth much in a place like this. Where you come from, maybe, but not here."

The man reached up with one hand and tugged back his hood a little. Haus hunched his shoulders and tried to look up at the human's face. He saw a strong chin, a sharp nose, the two trails of a thick dark mustache.

"A little more," Haus said quietly.

The man squared his shoulders so his back was firmly facing the rest of the bar. Then he pulled his hood back a little more, revealing the sharp eyes and firm brow that Haus had definitely seen on too many news broadcasts to count.

Just as quickly as he'd shown his face, Bel Iblis pulled up the hood and hid it again.

"I'm impressed you came here yourself," Haus said.

"I'm a believer that if you want something done right, you should do it yourself. Also, besides Sena, there's no one in my office I trust to handle this meeting."

"Does anyone else know you're here? Anyone in the Senate?" He ran his mind over the list of pro-Republic senators still free: Bail Organa, Mon Mothma...

"No one," Bel Iblis said firmly.

"Let's keep it that way for now."

"Agreed."

"Well, Senator, you've got me here. What did you go to all this length to discuss?"

"Prefect Haus, we know that your organization is the most active and capable anti-Imperial resistance unit in Imperial City right now."

"That's flattering, but I'm not sure how true it is. You know our numbers were severely cut recently."

"I do. I also know that your organization is not just limited to Coruscant, but operates on other planets as well. That's a rare thing. Most resistance cells seem to be localized on single planets, even single cities."

"I don't want to overstate our reach, but yes, we do have associates on other worlds." He wasn't going to name them, not even if Bel Iblis asked. Yimmon had barely escaped one Imperial trap alive; Haus wasn't going to be the one tipping the Imps off to his new hiding place on Toprawa.

"A man in my position has many resources but not enough people he trusts to put them to use," Bel Iblis said.

"And you trust our people?"

"I'd like to."

"If you're looking for ways to coordinate anti-Imperial attacks, well, I'm open, but we're going to have to decide that on a case-by-case basis." Haus leaned forward a little more. "For us to meet together more than once is risky, so if you can set me up with a certain lieutenant I can communicate with, even Miss Midanyl, that might be the best way to proceed."

"I thought you'd say as much. I'm willing to work out a safe arrangement."

"Good. What kind of cooperation do you have in mind?"

"That rather depends on the capabilities of your organization."

Haus hesitated. He wasn't going to reveal the detailed inner-workings of Whiplash to the senator, but there were still things he needed to know.

"Senator," he said, "Our organization is potentially about to go through some major changes."

Bel Iblis's mouth tilted down to a frown. "Meaning what exactly?"

"At this moment, we're actually sending out feelers for *another* alliance."

"I see. May I ask with whom?"

Haus had brought it up. There was no point in backing out now. "This is just between the two of us. Even Midanyl doesn't know, not unless I tell her."

"Go ahead," Bel Iblis nodded.

"We're currently negotiating with the rebel fleets of Zozridor Slayke and Jereveth Syne."

Bel Iblis didn't say anything, didn't betray anything with his face, but Haus could see his body stiffen beneath those robes. Softly, the senator said, "How far along is this alliance?"

"Nascent. We haven't even had first talks yet, but they're coming soon."

"With Slayke and Syne together?"

Bel Iblis sounded skeptical. Haus frowned. "As I understand it. I'm not taking lead on negotiations."

"There has been some... talk in certain circles. Questions. Slayke and Syne are an interesting combination. Slayke's always been a Republic patriot. Syne was a Separatist."

"Bavinyar joined the CIS because-"

"I know the politics of it. Believe me. It's just that in certain circles, there's been the question of whether we should embrace *all* anti-Imperial groups, or just those pledged to restore the Republic."

Ah, that was the crux of it. Obviously a concern to a politician, but Haus didn't see how it mattered on the ground. It might be an issue in the future, but right now those fighting the Empire wouldn't afford to split them-selves into smaller factions.

He said, "Slayke and Syne have put together the most successful force anti-Imperial naval force in the galaxy. The HoloNet tries to bury stories of Bavinyar and their new hit in the Koornacht Cluster, but people know. Those two, they're giving beings all over the galaxy hope. Probably more than me, or you, Senator, no offense."

"None taken." Bel Iblis said evenly.

"Senator, I say that if you can make that alliance work in the short term, then worry about the long term later."

"If there *is* an alliance, it will come through your organization, Prefect."

"We can be glorified middlemen if we have to be. If we combine your resources and their offensive capabilities..."

"Then we might be able to create a *real* rebel alliance," Bel Iblis said. "The kind that can put a *real* dent in the Emperor's power."

He could hear the excitement in the Senator's voice; controlled but very present. He felt it too. The only way to really hurt the Empire was to patch all their resources together.

The fate of the whole galaxy might be about to change here, in the Raunchy Mynock. It was funny but Haus didn't laugh.

"This is all very tentative," he told Bel Iblis seriously. "We shouldn't get ahead of ourselves."

"Of course," the senator nodded. "I'll wait for news of your negotiations with Syne and Slayke."

"How will we communicate from here on?"

"I'll send Sena to contact you through your police office."

"Be very careful. I don't know how many of my officers I can trust."

"I understand. We'll be very discreet."

"Okay. I'll trust you on that."

Bel Iblis rose from the booth. He gave Haus a curt nod and said, "Thank you for the evening's entertainment. It was... most interesting."

As he walked out, Bel Iblis spared only a tiny glance at the stage, where a couple gold-skinned Twi'lek girls had joined the pink Zeltrons. Pol Haus watched them dis-interestedly as he finished his drink, then got up and left. The show wasn't that good anyway and he had bigger things on his mind.

* * *

The Inquisitors were practicing late into the night, as Vader knew they would be. When he arrived on the sparring floor he saw Kuthara watching over the trainees gathered around the dueling circle. He knew that the Falleen had fallen into Jerec's circle, and though he might object to Vader's presence, he had no cause to throw him out.

He sidled next to Kuthara and said, "How goes the training, Inquisitor?"

"We are down to the last round of the day, Lord Vader," the Falleen glanced at him sideways. "Please, stay and watch."

Unlike many of the lesser Inquisitors, Kuthara showed no awkwardness at Vader's presence. Kuthara had been a criminal once, relying on his Force talents to cheat his victims and stay one step ahead of law enforcement and rival gangs. After his capture by ISB agents, his Force powers had been identified and he had been moved to Imperial Center, where Jerec had swept in to complete the training he now passed down to more students.

The match was between two humanoid females. Both were teenagers. Vader recognized the Arkanian as Hanna Ding, a Jedi padawan who had been captured during the raid on the Temple almost two years ago. Unlike most the padawans who had fought

Vader and the assaulting clone troopers to the death, Ding had thrown up her hands and allowed herself to be taken prisoner.

After two years, Vader was surprised the girl was still alive. He'd expected a coward like her to be torn to pieces by the more savage youths that had been brought in as Inquisitors, youths like the late Problus Tesla, whose training Vader and Kuthara had shared.

The other female was an Omwati whom he did not recognize. Her feathery white hair had been cut short and her lithe sky-blue body danced in swift circles around Hanna Ding, who kept her saber up defensively. To her credit, Ding did an excellent job batting back every swipe and jab the other girl attempted.

"Who is the Omwati?" Vader asked Kuthara.

"Ah, that is Lya Beran. We pulled her from the Agricultural Corps."

The Agri-Corps was a place the Jedi Temple used to send washed-out padawans. Judging by the young Omwati's skill with a lightsaber, the Jedi had given up on her too early.

He reached out with the Force and tried to get a sense of the two combatants. From Lya Beran he sensed a single-minded determination to break through the wall of Hanna Ding's defenses, clouded by frustration at having failed to do so already.

As for Ding, he sensed a hyper-focused awareness on Beran's attacks, but something else lurked beneath that, too. He sensed a fear, not of Beran herself, but of failure.

Omwati and Arkanians were both considered cold, analytical races, and it was fascinating to watch these two young women pitch toward uncontrollable anger as the match ran on. Beran could not break the wall and Ding would not strike out; the battle seemed doomed to go on forever until one of the two girls found the anger and strength to unleash the power of the Dark Side within them.

When that happened, it was very possible the other girl would be killed. Vader glanced at Kuthara and saw a tight smile on the Falleen's face. He knew this, expected it, and had probably seen it before. He savored the thought of bloodshed to come.

They were a world away from the Jedi Academy that Anakin Skywalker had known.

Beran took two steps away from Ding and began to pace around her in a slow circle. The Arkanian kept pivoting on her heel with her saber facing the Omwati.

Then Beran lunged. She dipped her lightsaber down, slicing into the metal floor and sending red sparks into Ding's face. The girl gave a pathetic yelp and staggered back. Beran wheeled her lightsaber upward again and lunged.

Ding swept out with her lightsaber and knocked Beran's attack aside. Then she whipped her blade back up into its vertical defensive position and stood still.

Vader could feel the rage radiating off of Beran. The Omwati woman was desperate to end a fight that had gone on far longer than she had expected. Her mouth was already slack-open and panting, but as she stared at the defiant Arkanian, Beran's jaw dropped wider until a feral, angry scream filled the sparring chamber.

Then she charged. She swung one, two, three times. Each blow crackled and rebounded against Ding's light-saber. The fourth attack landed and pressed hard. Sparks flared between the two girls as Beran tried to knock Ding off her feet, but the Arkanian was larger, and Vader could feel a new confidence in her.

With a flick of the wrist, Ding dropped her weapon low and stepped aside. Beran stumbled forward. Ding brought her lightsaber down and severed Beran's right hand at the wrist.

The Omwati fell to the floor, screaming. Her lightsaber tumbled in front of her and with a deft motion, Hanna Ding sliced it in two. The smoking halves of the cylinder clattered in front of Lya Beran, mocking her as she clutched the stump of her right hand.

Hanna Ding stood imperiously over her. Radiating a new confidence, the Arkanian held her blade level over Beran's neck and asked, "Do you yield?"

Vader glanced at Kuthara. The bloodlust was gone from his face; this was not the outcome he'd been expecting or hoping for. He wondered if Kuthara, or Jerec himself, hadn't already laid claim to Lya Beran's future.

"Do you yield?" Hanna Ding repeated.

"I yield," Beran's voice cracked with pain and shame.

Hanna Ding lowered her lightsaber but did not shut it off. She looked toward Kuthara but froze for a moment; she clearly had been so involved in the fight that she hadn't noticed the Dark Lord's arrival.

She recovered quickly and said, "Master Kuthara, Lord Vader, the match is finished. I am the victor."

"So you are," Kuthara agreed. He clapped his hands and said, "Summon the medical droids and get Miss Beran to the infirmary. Miss Ding, come here."

Hanna Ding finally shut off her lightsaber and clipped it to her belt. She walked past Lya Beran's crouched form without looking back. When she reached Vader and Kuthara she dropped to one knee and lowered her head.

"You've done very well, Miss Ding," Kuthara said. He'd recovered from his shock and sounded quite pleased. "You are to be commended for waiting out Miss Beran's attacks until she became vulnerable."

"Thank you, Master."

Vader looked at Kuthara. "What is her reward to be for winning the match?"

"The respect of her fellow Inquisitors, of course." Kuthara gave a needle-toothed smile.

It didn't sound like a grand reward to Vader, but he could feel the pride and gratitude radiating from the girl at his feet. Behind her, the medical droids were arriving to gather Beran's huddled form. The Omwati girl had been knocked from grace and outright humiliated, and the other Inquisitor trainees would pick on her next.

He didn't feel pity for her. She had grown overconfident and allowed her judgment to fail her.

When he looked back down at Hanna Ding he understood her better. For the past two years she'd languished as a trainee Inquisitor, looked down on as soft and cowardly by more simple and violent beings. She'd kept striving only because of her all-

consuming need to prove herself in the eyes of others, and now she'd finally done it.

He sensed the potential for strength in this girl, and the potential for crippling weakness. In another life, he'd known both, and from the same sources. Much depended on what happened to her next.

"You may rise, Hanna Ding," he said.

The Arkanian girl got to her feet. Her pale gold eyes settled on the black surface of Vader's mask and didn't flinch.

"I will be taking charge of your training from now on," he told her. He felt Kuthara's surprise, but the Falleen didn't dare interject.

"It is a great honor, Lord Vader," she said.

"It is that. I am giving you your most important opportunity to prove yourself. You will not get another."

The thrill of victory was still with her; she didn't flinch. "I looked forward to it, Lord Vader."

"Good. Rest yourself tonight, Hanna Ding. Tomorrow the new stage of your training begins."

"Yes, Lord Vader!"

Before Ding could say any more, before Kuthara could interject into the surprising proceedings, Vader turned and marched out of the room, trailing his black cloak behind him.

* * *

The entertainment Pol Haus attended after the Raunchy Mynock was of a very different kind. To be honest it wasn't much to his taste either- he was too literal-minded for poetry readings- but at least the tapcafe where the readings were being held was quiet and cozy instead of loud and crass. It was a nice change from the evening's earlier meeting.

Haus sat in the back of the gallery, sipping away at a cup of a Chandrilan tea that did a good job of clearing his senses after that drink at the Raunchy Mynock. He listened and tried to even comprehend the first set of readings by a human male who wore a flat brown cap to cover his bald spot. Next was a little blue Mrlssti

who chirped off some mathematical proof that apparently also doubled as poetry; that one went even further over Haus' head than usual.

Then Sheel Mafeen went on stage. The Togruta woman wore a shimmering blue dress that contrasted nicely with the white and deep red of her skin, and Pol Haus tried his best to make sense of her poems.

As a police prefect, he understood that poetry, and art in general, was tricky business under the New Order. The Empire was promoting its own version of high art and culture while at the same time monitoring art made by private citizens and censoring expressions deemed unsupportive of 'patriotism, unity, and morality.' Most of that was done by government organizations specifically devoted to propaganda and censorship, which Pol Haus as glad for; policing the Zi-Kree district would be tough enough without having to haul in beings for having the wrong music in their collection or art on their walls.

As he glanced around the cafe's clientele, Haus didn't see anyone he flagged as a spy for COMPNOR or ISB, but you could never be too sure. Everyone looked on edge and he caught a few beings sending suspicious glances his way. In fairness to them, he didn't really look like the typical poetry-reading audience.

As for Sheel, she just read her work. Despite being part of Whiplash, her actual poems had never been explicitly political. They were, rather, very deep and personal and involved a lot of precise, borderline-neurotic self-analysis that Haus normally tried to avoid. However, like a lot of self-professed non-political artists, the extreme nature of recent changes sometimes forced her private views into public. Tonight a lot of the audience seemed anxiously waiting for some kind of slip, some kind of admission of Sheel's private burning hatred for the Empire and her cries of revolt.

The whole thing seemed little distasteful for Haus. It was as if all these cafe-dwelling poetry-reading artisan types were waiting for someone else to say out loud what they were afraid to say themselves, so they could live a little petty rebellion through the poet without putting themselves at risk,

That night Sheel let them down. She didn't make any veiled comments about the menace of Imperial oppression, at least none Haus picked up on. When she was done, she bowed to the dutiful, slightly disappointed applause, and stepped off the stage.

After Sheel came some Mon Calamari female who started reciting, in a mix of verse and song, what she claimed was a modern reinterpretation of one of her people's most cherished legends. Pol Haus had heard of Mon Cal opera, which meant that, in theory, that race was capable of beautiful singing, but if they were, the current performer wasn't doing much to convince him. Thank-fully, he only had to listen to the first minute before Sheel tapped him on the shoulder.

She leaned in close, smiled, and said, "Want to take a stroll?"

"Gladly," he breathed, and they went out into the night.

Coruscant's climate control system just had allowed one of its rare, precisely-timed rainfalls that evening, and though the water had stopped falling the air was thick and damp and walkways still shone with water. Haus and Sheel even had to step over a few puddles as they mingled with the pedestrians.

"Well, Pol, what did you think of the readings tonight?" she asked conversationally.

"You know I don't do poetry."

"Then you just came by to see me? I'm touched."

She said it coyly, but he wondered how honest she was. Increasingly Sheel had become one of the only people in his life whom he could trust; more than that, she had a poet's vivacity that rang in great and necessary contrast to his dour prefect's persona. And for a Togruta, she *was* rather pretty.

He said, "Pavan should be having his meeting soon."

"I know," Sheel nodded. She hooked one arm around Haus' and moved a little closer. "What happens if it's successful?"

"Then we set up a way for them to meet Yimmon."

He hadn't told her about meeting Bel Iblis. He wanted to tell her now, because that short strange meeting in the most unlikely of places left him feeling more exhilarated about his life and work than

anything in the past five years, and sharing it with Sheel would have made it even better.

But like he'd already told Bel Iblis, this new arrangement was something they'd have to keep as secret as possible. The only people he *might* tell were Yimmon and Jax Pavan, and the latter only so he might use it as a negotiating tool, but if this information was too important to trust Sheel with, it was too important to trust to the HoloNet too.

"What happens if they don't reach an agreement?" Sheel asked.

Haus hadn't even allowed himself to think about that. There was too much at stake in these meetings, now more than ever.

"If we fail," he said, "Then everything fails. If we can't patch together a few petty differences to make a stand now..."

He trailed off, shaking his head, but Sheel finished his thoughts. "We'll all just wither away, and nothing we've done, or will do, will matter in the big scheme of things."

Haus sighed. "You're supposed to be the optimistic one."

"Am I?" A smile tugged on her white lips. "If I'm the dour one now, what does that make you?"

She was teasing him again. He liked it when she teased him, but he wasn't going to let her show it.

"A bastion of optimism," he said without enthusiasm.

"Sounds exciting." She leaned in a little closer and made him feel like a stupid adolescent. "I feel better about the future already."

* * *

When dawn came up on Imperial City, Darth Vader was deep in the bowels of Imperial Palace, inside the wing constructed for the training of Inquisitors. Hanna Ding had moved her scant possessions out of that wing the previous night and relocated to her new master's section of the palace, but Vader's business there wasn't complete.

High Inquisitor Jerec's quarters were located in the heart of the complex, far from the outer walls. Vader was expecting some sign of ostentatiousness to fit Jerec's ambition and ego, even if it wasn't

as grandiose of Palpatine's cavernous throne room. Yet when he stepped inside, all he saw was black.

For ordinary beings the sudden plunge into total darkness would have been disorienting, which was no doubt the point. For Vader, it took only a second for his helmet's eyepieces to switch to an infra-red scan. Even when they did they told him nothing the Force had not already. The room was cool, small, and empty save for Jerec himself, who sat cross-legged, levitating in the center of the room. Some gentle orchestral music filled the air, but it provoked no emotion in Jerec that Vader could feel.

"Welcome, Lord Vader," Jerec said. He was facing away from his visitor but made no attempt to turn around. "May I ask the purpose of your visit?"

For months now Jerec had been climbing higher in the Emperor's esteem while Vader had chased Jax Pavan in the stupid hope of turning Anakin Skywalker's old friend dark. Jerec had to understand that time was over.

He said, "I came to see after the student Lya Beran. I understand she was wounded rather badly in her recent sparring match."

"And why would you ask *me* about her? You could have simply asked Kuthara."

"Kuthara seemed to have an interest in her," Vader said. He began to walk in a slow circle around Jerec. "I took that to mean that you had an interest as well."

"I believe you were mistaken. Kuthara's interests aren't automatically my own."

Vader passed in front of the man's face. Jerec hid himself well in the Force, and Vader couldn't tell if he was telling the truth, or if he was lying to hide his embarrassment at his protégé's failure.

"Perhaps you have heard that I've taken her combatant under my wing."

"Yes," Jerec allowed, "Kuthara did explain that to me."

Vader thought he heard just a bit of annoyance in that voice. He said, "I have decided to become more involved in the operations on

the Inquisitorius and the training of new members. I believe they will become a major force in the creation of our new Empire."

"I quite agree, Lord Vader. I've told the Emperor so many times."

Darth Sidious was no fool. He knew Jerec's interests lay only in building a power base. As he continued his slow circle, Vader wondered what Jerec had been like before his turn to the dark. He wondered if he'd been as powerful a Master as Kenobi or Altis, or even Windu.

He wondered, too, how much Jerec knew of him. The man was resourceful as well as curious, and he'd surely have used his many contacts to try and ferret out the identity of the Emperor's most prized enforcer.

"I believe my new apprentice shows great promise," he said. "She is one of the few in the Inquisitorius who has had true Jedi training."

"She was a padawan," Jerec said dismissively.

"Yet she was still trained. Would you agree that none serve the Dark Side so well as fallen Jedi?"

"There does seem to be a certain... proclivity."

"What do you believe your old master would say to you now, Lord Jerec?"

There was a pause. They knew that Jerec's teacher, the old archivist Jocasta Nu, had been killed by Vader himself during the attack on the Jedi Temple.

Eventually he said, "It doesn't matter. Every student learns in order to surpass his teacher. That's what I have done."

"And the apprentices whom you teach?"

There was a chuckle in the dark. "I train them, Lord Vader. That is not quite the same as *teaching*."

Jerec was like Darth Sidious in his ability to callously use other beings. Wondering if there was anything left of the Jedi he'd once been, Vader asked, "Did you merely train Aameesa Darys? I understand she was your Jedi apprentice for many years."

"Darys was just the first of many."

"Is that why you've arranged for a clone of her to be grown?"

He'd shown his hand, revealed just a little of the intelligence he'd secretly gathered. Let Jerec go to the Emperor about it if he wanted to; Darth Sidious would probably be pleased at Vader's initiative.

Jerec said, "That was the Emperor's idea. He wanted to experiment with cloning Force-sensitive bodies."

"There is a history of madness in cloned Jedi."

"As I said, it will be an experiment."

Despite his efforts, Vader couldn't pierce the hard shell Jerec had erected around himself in the Force. He didn't know if Jerec still had any attachment to Jocasta Nu or Aamea Darys, or if he'd burned everything away to make himself a more perfect servant of the dark.

If he had, which now seemed likely, then it would take Darth Vader more than a few apprentices to retain his supremacy over Jerec. He was still bound to Anakin Skywalker by Jax Pavan, by unwanted dreams, even memories not yet burned away.

"Thank you for the conversation, Lord Jerec," he said. "I will see you again."

"I look forward to it, Lord Vader."

He broke the circle and walked out of the room and into the light. When the eyepiece of his mask had adjusted to the sudden brightness, he began walking down the corridor.

He knew what had to be done, and Hanna Ding was just the start. As for the rest, it once again came back to Jax Pavan.

7

"As a journalist I always tried to look for the personal side of every story. I tried to find interesting individuals and write about them as individuals instead of actors in some big drama-political drama, social drama, whatever. By the time the Empire rolled around I wasn't a journalist any more and to be honest I think I'd stopped thinking about individual actors too. When I started fighting Palpatine I forgot that even in his Empire, there were still some decent beings who were simply trying to do what they thought was right."

Jan Dodonna was genuinely surprised by how quickly men and supplies arrived at N'zoth. The post-battle recovery and subsequent reconstruction of the shipyards appeared to be the Emperor's top priority. It seemed like half the construction crews from Anaxes had been sent his way.

It took some of the sting off the battle itself, but only some. In the end, they'd lost three capital ships, including the stolen *Leveler*, as well as two complete pylons extending from the station hub, and nearly five thousand servicemen. The enemy had gotten away without a single casualty, and Syne's current location was unknown. No matter what, the shame would be with Dodonna for a long time.

The Koornacht Cluster and Black Fifteen fell under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Home Fleet, now the largest naval

group in the Empire. Based out of Anaxes, the Home Fleet was charged with securing Coruscant and nearby valuable worlds. For the moment, that also included the Empire's nascent presence in the Deep Core, which meant that the man Jan Dodonna had to answer to in his shame, the man who was providing him with so many capable repair crews, was Admiral Terrinald Screed.

Screed had always been a hands-on commander, and Dodonna was fully unsurprised when the Admiral messaged to say he was coming to N'zoth personally. Dodonna also knew the man was not overly big on ceremony, so he prepared an honor guard of only one squadron of clone troopers to welcome the admiral into a private hangar bay.

When the shuttle landed, Dodonna was at the front of the troop column, waiting to meet his commander. When the ramp came down, he saw that Screed had brought four guards of his own, more clone troopers. Finally, the admiral himself came slowly down the ramp.

Dodonna hadn't seen the man since the end of the war almost two years previously, but he seemed unchanged from the day when the two of them had received the Holt Cross for their actions against Dua Ningo's fleet. Screed's flagship had been torn open in the fighting and so had Screed himself. When they'd gone up for their award, he'd hobbled with a cane in one hand and his other on Dodonna's shoulder.

Screed still had the cane with him, and he still moved with a stiff limp. The right side of his face was scarred from an even older battle, and his eye replaced by an electronic processor. He seemed to have lost some weight, but his scarred and battered dignity was mistakable.

Dodonna smiled. Despite everything that had happened at N'zoth, he was glad to see his friend.

He flattened the smile and snapped a salute. "Admiral Screed, I welcome you to Black Fifteen, future home of Black Sword Command. I wish it could be under better circumstances."

Screed returned the salute, a little lazily, then said, "I wish it too. Still, it's good to see you, General."

"Thank you, sir. I've prepared quarters on the station for you, if you'd like to see them."

"I'll have my men move my things there. Right now I'd like to talk to you."

"Very good. I've prepared a place."

After giving instructions to Screed's guards, Dodonna led the admiral down a set of white hallways to a small conference room. One wall contained a broad transpari-steel viewport that looked out on the bright lights of the Koornacht Cluster. The colorful starfield made the dark drifting construction vessels even easier to see.

They sat down at the table and Dodonna began to explain the situation. He was sure Screed had already read much of this information in reports, but he went through it again anyway; the admiral was always a stickler for the details.

Once he'd gone over most of his summary, Screed asked, "How long do you think the attack will set back completion of Black Fifteen?"

"I'm not sure, sir. It might be a year, even more. The help you've sent us from Anaxes is more than I expected but, to be honest, our biggest problem might be closer to home."

"And what is that?" Screed raised the one eyebrow he had left.

"The natives, sir. I don't know how much you've read about the Yevetha."

"Jan, you don't have to call me 'sir,' not in private." Screed sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "But yes, I have read about the Yevetha. Nasty pieces of work. I'm glad we got them under our thumb before they started causing trouble for us."

"You have a point, but I don't like using them for labor."

"From what I've read they seemed reasonably intelligent. Some say they have a special talent for machinery."

"They *have* displayed good engineering skills. They're fast learners, especially with technical matters, and I'm afraid that's part of the problem."

"Sabotage?"

Dodonna nodded.

"Have you been able to catch the perpetrators?"

"Most of the time, yes. When the sabotage has resulted in Imperial or civilian deaths, we've had them privately executed. The rest have been sent to prison."

Screed frowned. "I know you won't like this, Jan, but it may be best to execute *all* saboteurs. Publicly."

Dodonna's throat went dry. "That's a good way to burn bridges. If the Emperor is serious about putting up Black Sword Command here, we're going to have to live with the Yevetha for a long time."

"From what I've read, these aliens may be clever with technology, but the only thing they *really* understand is violence."

"The Yevetha revere their martyrs, Terrinald, especially when they die fighting another race. The more martyrs I make, the more will come charging in."

"And you think speaking *nicely* with the Yevetha will change their species' in-bred nature?" Screed's voice was incredulous, even mocking.

"I don't know," Dodonna admitted, "But as ranking officer at N'zoth it's my choice to make, and I'll stay with it until I decide otherwise."

"Very well, then."

An awkward silence passed between them. Dodonna wasn't used to awkward silences with Screed; back during the Clone Wars, chasing Dua Ningo, they'd alternately finished each other's sentences or lulled simultaneously into comfortable quiet.

There were plenty of ways to break it. Dodonna asked, "Can you give me any updates on Jereveth Syne?"

Screed shook his head. "No, because there are none to give."

"Then you have no idea where her fleet is?"

"If we did, I'd be out there with half the Home Fleet chasing her down. After the mess at Bavinyar we were hoping she'd scattered along with the rest of her refugees, but given that she's just stolen a star destroyer, I guess we were kidding ourselves. As it is, we don't even know if she's still allied with Slayke. He's done only a few minor hit-and-runs since Bavinyar."

"Have we been able to trace what happened to the Bavinyari refugees?"

"Not many. We think some of them may have joined the Doreans. Have you heard of them? More stubborn aliens, on the Outer Rim. Dornea isn't a priority for the Empire right now, so we haven't put any effort into subduing them. Frankly, I was hoping Syne *had* camped her fleet with them. At least then we'd know where to find her when we wanted to. Right now she could come from any-where, hit anywhere."

"I wish someone would have *told* me about that destroyer." Dodonna scowled. "When it first showed up, claiming to be *Javelin* but an hour early, I *knew* some-thing was wrong. They had the codes- stolen, somehow, probably- but I still wasn't convinced."

Screed made a face. Dodonna asked, "You knew about *Valediction*?"

Screed nodded slowly. "The circumstances of its hijacking are... complicated. I agreed- with Moff Tarkin *and* the Emperor- that it was best kept quiet for now. For troop morale."

Dodonna didn't know whether to feel angry or very, very tired. "You couldn't just tell *me*?"

"I can't just bend rules for friends, Jan."

"I know. I know." Dodonna sighed. "Still, I'm the ranking officer of an important new military base. For the sake of doing my job, I need to know about things like *Valediction*, and whatever other secrets you're hiding."

Something rattled in Screed's throat. He said, "I'm sorry, Jan, but it's just a matter of need to know. It was like that under the Republic, it's even *more* like that under the Empire. It's not my fault."

"I know, I'm sorry." Dodonna slumped a little in his chair. "This mess could have been prevented. *Leveler* could have been secured. Five thousand lives could have been saved."

"Yes. But not by you."

Dodonna sighed again. "I felt more under control during the war. I don't *want* the war back, but... I don't like sitting here, waiting for it come to me either."

"Hunting Syne and Slayke isn't your job."

"Whose is it?"

Screed didn't give an answer. Instead he said, "She won't attack the same place twice. It's not her way. Jan, your job is to oversee the repairs and continued construction of this base. Will you do that?"

"You know I can."

"Jan, you're the best damn officer I ever served with and maybe the best *man*. I know you *can* do it, but *will* you?"

"Of course." Dodonna felt offended but wasn't sure why. "What else do you think I'd do?"

Screed shrugged a little. "A lot of men have retired since the Separatists surrendered."

"I'm not old enough to retire."

"No, but you're not young either. Neither of us are. Personally, I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to lay down your badge and find a pretty woman before you really *do* get old."

Dodonna chuckled once. "I guess that option isn't *completely* unattractive. Have you been tempted?"

"Tempted by what?" Screed scrunched his scarred face and rapped one fist against his stomach; knuckles rattled against the metal plates that held his body together. "No woman's going to bunk with me unless I pay her good money first, Jan. Lucky for me the new rank came with a pay raise."

Dodonna looked down, embarrassed and a little ashamed of his own good luck. "So you're in it for the long haul, then? A career officer?"

"It's all I ever wanted to be," Screed kept smiling, but the bitterness didn't go away.

The awkward silence returned. Dodonna's mind thrashed around for something to say. "Captain Nahm's here. He's still commanding *Starwind*. Saved us from taking even more damage from Syne, too."

"Is that a fact?" Screed said evenly.

"Yes. I put in a notice for him. I hope he gets a task force of his own one day. He certainly deserves it."

"It's possible. Without the war, advancement doesn't come as quickly as it used to."

"True," Dodonna admitted, then added with a smile, "It's a good thing we got our big promotions in already, isn't it?"

"Yes," Screed smiled back. Instead of bitter, it seemed a little sad.

"I was wondering if you'd like to for Captain Nahm to join us for dinner tonight. My personal quarters, and kitchen, are undamaged."

"It's all right, Jan. The trip from Anaxes was... tiring. I'll be retiring early tonight."

"I see." Dodonna fought a frown. Screed was not an old man, but the damage he'd taken in multiple battles had taken a toll on him physically and mentally. They'd been apart for so long that Dodonna had forgotten that simple fact about his friend.

"Well," he said, "If you'd like, I can show you to your quarters. I promise they'll be quite comfortable."

"I'm sure they will be. Thank you, Jan." Screed put both hands on the table pushed himself upward. Dodonna fought the urge to help him up. When he was stable Screed looked to him and said, "Please, lead the way."

18

"My life with Jax Pavan and his gang took me on a lot of weird twists and introduced me to a lot of people I'd have never expected to meet. Still, when we left home-sweet-Coruscant to meet with the envoy, I had no idea what kind of new twists it would take me down, or the kind of people whose stories I was about to get sucked into."

I'd been to a lot of uncanny corners of the galaxy, but I'd never once been to Metellos. There'd never been a reason to go. Everybody said it was an overcrowded, polluted, poverty-ridden dump. Now, being a journalist (well, ex-journalist by that point) I always tried to keep an open mind when going to new places and seeing new people. I braced myself to be pleasantly surprised.

I wasn't. Metellos *is* a dump.

We landed *Laranth* in one of the honeycombs of a massive hangar complex on the south edge of the capital city, though like Coruscant, the actual urban space just sprawled on and on and on. It was raining outside, gray and dismal, so we put on hats and water-proof gear before going outside, even I-Five, who elected to wear his mock-human body.

Despite being a dump, Metellos is full of people, mostly ones who want to be someplace else. Everybody in the streets walks with heads down and hands in their pockets. I guessed this wasn't just because the rain; Metellos is a place where people minded their own

business, which was probably part of the reason why our rendezvous was taking place here.

As groups went, the five of us were a little noticeable. To the casual viewer there were three humans, a Zabrak who looked almost-human with a big rainproof hood covering her horns, and yours truly, who didn't look human at all. I'd gotten used to sticking out since I left Sullust all those years ago, but I realized that if the Imps *did* have lookouts on Metellos, I'd be the big give-away.

Thankfully, we had Jax and Magash reaching out with their Force powers for any sign of unwanted attention, especially the kind that came from Inquisitors. We'd gotten used to sensing and dodging them on Coruscant, which was where most of them were; there didn't seem to be enough of them to place groups on dumps like Metellos, but I felt paranoid anyway.

As per the instructions Pol Haus gave Jax, we settled down at a pre-determined eating establishment. Said establishment didn't have much floor space, so they put us on a balcony looking down on continual rainfall plunging deep into Metellos' metal canyons. The over-hang protecting us from the rain had more than a few holes, and we hunched together at one of the few tables that remained completely dry while a four-armed server droid who'd seen better days took our orders and brought us back four bowls of noodles and hot broth.

As he watched us eat, I-Five gave a very realistic sigh. "I really wish this body was capable of processing liquids. Even that would help."

"I didn't know you wanted to be human so bad," Sacha said.

I-Five looked like he'd just taken the worst insult. "I don't, but I wore this body to fit in. I can't fit in very well if I'm the only one not eating or drinking."

"You're not missing much," I said after slurping down a few noodles.

"The broth's good though," said Sacha. "Warms you right up."

Magash's attention wasn't on her bowl. She was scanning the city scene beyond with a look of mild confusion on her face.

"What's up, Magash?" Jax asked.

"The air here seems quite... different. It feels heavier and has a distinct smell." Her nose crinkled.

"They can't afford pollution scrubbers here like they do on Coruscant," I told her. "Spend a few years here and it'll take a decade off your life."

"Are there many planets in the galaxy like this?"

"This is one of the more polluted ones," Jax admitted, "But some are even worse. On Duro they can't even *breath* the normal atmosphere anymore. Everybody lives in city-ships floating in orbit."

"Why do beings let their homes get so despoiled?"

"Money, mostly. Or apathy. On places like Metellos, the handful of people who can afford air scrubbers install them in their homes. Some people buy masks. Most of them just have to live with it."

"I don't suppose one gets *used* to air like this."

"I'm afraid not."

Magash sighed slightly. "I find I miss Dathomir right now."

"Or Toprawa," said Sacha.

"Or Sullust," I added.

I-Five looked at me. "Perhaps our next trip will be to your homeworld. I've heard so much about it over the years, I've gotten curious."

"There's not much to see. Literally. Human eyes would be next to useless underground."

"I don't know" Sacha said. "All those tunnels sound kinda cozy."

"For Sullustans, maybe. A tall human like you would get cramped up and-"

Jax stiffened. So did Magash. I knew what that meant. I lowered my voice and asked, "What do you feel?"

"I don't sense anything," Sacha muttered, disappointed. Whatever Force sensitivity she had wasn't nearly on Jax's level, let alone Magash's.

"Inquisitors?" I pressed. For a moment I'd dropped my guard and now I was kicking myself for not being properly paranoid.

"It doesn't feel dark," Magash murmured.

I spun to look at Jax. His jaw was a little slack, his eyes distant. In all our journeys, we'd run into plenty of Dark Side users, and untrained Force-sensitives like Magash and Sacha, but none of them had produced this in Jax.

It was impossible. I couldn't believe it, but I didn't know what *else* it could be.

Suddenly Jax spun and looked behind him. Everyone else followed his gaze to see a tall, broad-shouldered human in a long brown rain-jacket. He pulled back his hood to reveal a tanned face marked by angular dark tattoos. His black hair was pulled into a tail that disappeared down his back.

Without a word, he walked up to our table and sat down at the open space on the bench next to Magash and across from Jax.

The two Jedi stared at each other in stunned silence until I-Five cleared his non-existent throat and said, "Are we to take it you're the agent we're supposed to meet?"

The man looked at I-Five for the first time. His eyes narrowed as he struggled to figure out just what the being in front of him was.

Then Jax finally spoke. "My name is Jax Pavan. What's yours?"

"A'Sharad Hett," the man said at last.

Jax thought for a moment. "You were a Master."

"That's right."

"I was a Knight. Barely. I finished my training under Master Piell right as the war was ending."

Hett just nodded. They continued to stare at one another in silence. I had no idea what to say. Not even I-Five was willing to interject.

Eventually Jax said, "You don't seem surprised to see me. Did they tell you we were sending a Jedi?"

"No," Hett shook his head, "But you're not the first Jedi I've seen since Order Sixty-Six."

"I'm not?"

I thought Jax would be excited to learn that there were other Jedi out there who'd survived. I wasn't expecting them to jump up and hug and cry, but I was expecting more than the caution, almost skepticism, that Jax was showing.

"I'm not with them now." Hett shook his head. "Have you ever heard of Djinn Altis?"

Jax's brows scrunched up. "Vaguely. He ran a... splinter group. They never talked about him much at the Temple."

"He's alive, and so are most of his followers. At least, he was when I met him. That was almost a year ago."

"Djinn Altis?" Sacha interjected. "Wasn't he involved with the Miracle at Bavinyar?"

Hett glanced at her. "You're well-informed."

"You were at Bavinyar too, then? Working with Syne?"

Now Hett seemed reluctant to expand. I had no idea how this super-important meeting of ours was going to go if nobody seemed willing to talk to each other.

Finally, he said, "I was at Bavinyar. So was Altis. What about you? Have you met any?"

Jax's jaw opened, then snapped shut again, like he was going to say something then decided better of it. He shook his head and said, "We haven't met any other Jedi. You're the first."

"Then it's a pleasure to meet you," Hett said, though he still sounded pretty guarded to me.

"We're here for a purpose," Magash reminded them.

"Of course," Hett nodded. "Syne and Slayke are interested in meeting your leader."

"I think he'd like to meet them too," I-Five said. "We're here to establish trust."

"I'd hope we can do *that*, considering," Sacha said.

I looked back and forth at Jax and this A'Sharad Hett. They were still eying each other cautiously, which seemed weird to me, I guess because I'd always assumed Jedi could read each other's minds perfectly with just a touch of the Force. Then I realized, maybe for the first time, that I'd never been around a pair of bona-fide Jedi at once. I'd never even met *any* Jedi until Bariss Offee on Drongar, and then it had been Jax on Coruscant. I'd never experienced two of them at the same time.

When the awkwardness dragged on too long, Sacha came out and asked, "Okay, I give up. what's wrong with you two?"

Hett frowned, but Jax let out a laugh that sounded almost relieved. "What do you mean?"

"You're *Jedi*. Both of you are supposed to be *extinct*. If I were you guys I'd be jumping up and down right now."

Hett didn't look like the type to start jumping up and down in any circumstances. He said, "I *am* glad to see your friends, and all of you. But there's something else here."

"I don't sense anything," Magash said.

Hett shot her a questioning glance. Jax said, "Magash isn't a Jedi, but I've been training her. She could sense your presence when you came here, but I guess she's not picking it up."

"Picking up *what*?" I asked. I was getting a little impatient and also creeped-out. "Is there someone else here?"

"I sense someone," Hett said vaguely. "I can't say where exactly, but they're nearby."

"An Inquisitor?" Sacha asked.

"I don't know. I've never faced an Inquisitor first-hand."

"I have," Jax swallowed. "This is different, though. I sense... anxiety, more than anything."

"It could be some untrained Force-sensitive," I suggested, recalling how Jax had stumbled on Kajin Savaros, the troubled Coruscant street-rat he'd tried to train as a Jedi.

"I feel it getting closer," Hett muttered. He reached into the pocket of his longcoat and kept his hand there. It was pretty obvious what he'd grabbed hold of.

"Maybe we should scatter," I-Five suggested.

"I second that," Sacha said. "I think we should-"

"Wait!" Hett snapped and jumped to his feet.

Jax rose too. I cursed inwardly as all the other patrons sitting under the awning stopped to stare at the two men who'd suddenly leaped up for no apparent reason.

Standing on the edge of the platform was a short humanoid figure buried beneath a black cloak. For a second I thought that somehow, some way, one of those Inquisitors had tracked us to this meeting, but neither Jax nor Hett pulled out their lightsabers.

"I know you," Hett muttered, so quietly only I could hear it.

The small figure stepped up to our table. Hett gestured for Jax to sit down and, reluctantly, he did. The other beings on the platform turned their attention back to their meals, which may or may not have been a Force-prompted decision.

The figure squeezed in on the bench between Hett and Magash. Beside the big human Jedi in particular, it looked thin and frail. Smooth little hands appeared to throw back the hood of the cloak. The girl sitting before us was human, probably not yet out of the teenage years, though the bags under her eyes and the sickly pallor to her skin made her look older. Her sandy brown hair was pulled back in a tight bun and a deep frown creased her face.

From the way Jax, Hett, and even Magash were looking at her, it was clear she was a Jedi, or something very close.

"We've met before," Hett told her. "Briefly. On *Chu'unthor*."

"I remember," the young woman nodded and looked at Jax. "You're a Jedi too."

"That's right," Jax said cautiously. "Who are you?"

"My name's Tallisabeth Enda-" she stopped, started again. "Just call me Scout."

"How did you *find* us?" I bleated. This supposedly-secret meeting had way too many surprises for my liking.

"I found *him*." She pointed to Hett, who frowned. "I heard Syne's people were active around the Koornacht Cluster so I hung around some of the supply ports trying to pick up intel. After that it was dumb luck. I felt you in the Force when you stopped to refuel at Ord Pavor. I couldn't catch up to you there so I followed you here."

A'Sharad Hett was clearly displeased to know he was so easy to track, and also clearly trying not to take it out on this teenage girl who'd suddenly popped in out of nowhere.

"Why did you go through all that trouble to track Master Hett?" Magash asked.

"Because I need his help." Scout licked dry lips. "I need all the help I can get."

"What *happened* to you?" Hett asked. "The last we met, you were going off with Master Altis."

"I did." She nodded gravely. "And that's why I need your help now."

"What happened to Altis?" Jax asked.

"Captured," Scout swallowed and looked at Hett. "So was Ash Jarvee. And Kina Ha."

Hett looked like he wanted to swear. "Where are they now?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but before they got grabbed, we were getting a pretty good idea. Looked like the Imps were taking captured Jedi and Force-sensitives into the Deep Core. We *have* to rescue them."

Now I wanted to swear. The Deep Core was halfway-uncharted. It was really hard to get into and even harder to get out of. The fact that the Imps were making some kind of secret fortress or something in there didn't surprise me one bit, and I knew it would be a disaster if we tried to sneak our way in there.

I also knew there was no way we'd turn her down.

"Please, all of you," Scout's voice cracked, "I need you. You're my only hope."

INTERLUDE: Beyond the Pale

They kept the prisoner waiting for a long time. At first he sat upright in his chair, alert, ready for someone to come through the door and sit down on the opposite side of the interrogation table. When no one did, he began to tap his fingers on the tabletop until he found a rhythm. When that got boring he stuck both hands in his trouser pockets and started to slump lazily, inching further and further down the seat of his chair. They'd taken him in while the sun was going down and he was started to get tired.

When the door finally opened he didn't jerk to attention. He just stayed there, insouciantly slumped, and watched a figure step into the room.

He hadn't been expecting anything specific, but he was still surprised. The being who sat down across the table wasn't even wearing a police uniform. Of course, that could have meant he was a plainclothes detective, but he didn't really *look* like a plainclothes detective either.

It wasn't just his species (though short, wide-faced, black-eyed Sullustan officers were generally a rarity, even on the Coruscant police force). He didn't carry himself like a detective. He was old and he hobbled with one bad leg propped by a silver cane. He didn't turn those big black eyes on the prisoner. He almost seemed scared to look at him.

The prisoner was curious. He tried not to show it.

The Sullustan looked at the tabletop. He absently stroked his gray beard with one hand. He drew in a deep breath, sighed it out, and finally looked up.

"You're probably wondering why you're here," the Sullustan said.

The prisoner was, but he tried not to show that either. He shrugged and said, "I figure it has to do with a case I've been working on. I didn't expect to be treated like a suspect, though."

The Sullustan folded his stubby-fingered hands on the tabletop. "A case?"

"I keep busy. There's always people who need help."

"So you're a private investigator?"

"You could call it that. I do a lot of odd jobs."

"Legal ones?"

"I'm as law-abiding as you are, detective. You are a detective, right?"

"How long have you been doing 'odd jobs'?"

The prisoner whistled. "A very long time."

"On Coruscant? Or other places?"

"Mostly Coruscant."

"But other places too?"

"A little. But this planet's my home."

"How long has it been your home?"

The prisoner frowned. He hated it when people pried into his background. "What kind of interrogation line is this? Aren't you supposed to be asking me about who I know or where I was last night?"

"I'm just... curious." The Sullustan looked like there was a whole lot more he wanted to say, but he didn't, and for a second the prisoner wondered who was supposed to be interrogating whom.

The prisoner sat upright now. He'd forgotten about the insouciant act he'd been putting on. There didn't seem to be a point in it any more. He didn't feel like a prisoner being interrogated; if anything it felt like the other way around. He didn't understand any

of it, not at all, but if he just sat and listened things would become clear. He didn't just feel that, he *knew* it somehow.

When the Sullustan halted his story the man found himself impatient to hear what happened next. Instead of continuing, the Sullustan sighed and let his eyes settle on the tabletop between them.

"I'd like to hear more," the man said, though he sensed what came next would be difficult.

"It was so strange," the Sullustan muttered, half to himself. "I think Jax *knew* things were going to go wrong. I mean, it had been almost two years since Order Sixty-Six. He'd become pretty much convinced that he was the last Jedi in the entire universe, and then two new ones suddenly show up right in front of him."

"You always heard stories about Jedi who survived the purge," the man said. "I never really took them seriously. I thought they were just stories."

The Sullustan stared at him, just *stared*. The man awkwardly looked away.

"But *two* new Jedi," he cleared his throat. "I'd have thought your friend would be overjoyed."

"I thought he would be too, but he wasn't. Maybe he got some... presentiment through the Force. Or maybe he was just shocked. He'd gotten used to thinking of himself as the last Jedi. He'd even taken it on himself to try and train new ones. And now here were two more: a padawan and a full-blown Master. It must have really jarred the image of himself he carried in his head."

"From what you say about him, Jax Pavan didn't seem like a man to get wrapped up in his own ego."

"That wasn't what I meant. It was just strange for him, I think."

"If it were me back then, and two Jedi showed up in, I'd be weirded-out too. And a little suspicious."

"Suspicious why?"

"Too good to be true."

The Sullustan's wide mouth creased in a slight smile. "Yeah. That's what I was thinking."

"You sound like a sensible one."

The Sullustan stared at him again with those damned black eyes. Then he blinked and looked down at the table-top. "Anyway, that's when things started to spin out of control for us. Those two Jedi..."

"You sound like you wish you'd never met them."

"That's not true," the Sullustan said, though he thought he heard hesitation in that voice. The Sullustan amended, "I'd only ever met two Jedi before. First was Barris Offee, who was pretty much everything they said Jedi were supposed to be, pure and heroic and all that. Then I met Jax, and, well, despite some petty misgivings on my part, Jax ended up being a great friend. He was a hero too."

"But these other two?"

"Honestly, the other two couldn't have been more different from each other. Scout was a *kid*, not a Jedi like Jax or Barriss, and you could tell just from looking at her that she'd been through hell just finding us. The other one, A'Sharad Hett, he was a big scary-looking human and you could tell that he'd been through multiple flavors of hell. More than Scout, more than Jax even."

"You were scared of a Jedi Master?"

"I wasn't scared. I was just... wary. I knew he was different from all the other Jedi I'd met before."

"I've heard the Jedi have this thing called the Dark Side of the Force," the man said, though he couldn't remember who'd told him that. "Did you think Hett was dark? Did Jax?"

"I don't know." The Sullustan shook his head. "I don't think Jax thought he was dark. I didn't either, not really. Jax just thought he was... Well, like I said, Hett had been through special kinds of hell none of us knew anything about. And he was a Master, so I think Jax looked on him with respect more than anything."

"Okay," the man said, "Enough about what you guys *felt*. What actually happened?"

The Sullustan lifted his eyes. "Are you that curious to find out?"

He didn't know why, but he was. He nodded.

"Okay," the Sullustan breathed. "Well, like I said, we were about to get swept up in something much bigger than anything we'd known before. There was a whole war against the Empire waging

beyond Whiplash, which I've alluded to in passing, and when we went to that meeting I'd braced myself for something big and crazy. What we got was big, and crazy, but not in the way we'd expected and certainly not that we'd wanted..."

PART II: Prakith & Sarillion
Kingdom of Loss

9

"When I heard we were hooking up with Syne and Slayke, I was a little confused as to what they meant. Slayke was a hardcore pro-Republic militia leader. Syne used to be a Jedi-hating Separatist. Of course, before the Empire came along. Jax was a Jedi, I was a journalist, I-Five was I-Five, Sacha was a podracer, and Magash was one of those Dathomiri witch things. So I probably shouldn't have been confused by the sight of strange bedfellows."

Valediction's white dagger dropped out of hyperspace and into orbit over Ord Mirit. The deep blues, greens, and whites of the planet shifted slowly beneath. A ring of vessels drifted in lower orbit: mostly cargo-haulers and star galleons, with a few light military vessels added to the mix, including two *Carrack*-class cruisers and one *Acclamator*-class carrier.

None of them gave any initial reaction to *Valediction's* arrival. Standing on the star destroyer's bridge, Jereveth Syne waited for someone to hail them. It took almost a full minute for the supply depot on the planet's surface to call them directly.

Even after the attack on N'zoth, the Empire was still sloppy. Syne hovered within earshot of the communication station as Wells, one of the handful of clone commandos who'd defected after *Valediction's* capture, spoke with the controller on Ord Mirit. The clones were eminently useful in situations like this; they were a

familiar presence to any Imperial functionary and lulled them into a false sense of security.

Upon request, Wells transmitted the identification codes for the star destroyer *Pride of Ralttir*. They'd recovered the ship's codes the same way they'd gotten *Javelin's*, by bribing an agent at the Imp shipyards at Bilbringi. After the fiasco at N'zoth it was very likely the Empire had changed-up codes on all ships.

Whether they had or hadn't didn't matter much this time around. Syne was just hoping for a little edge in the coming fight.

Yvolton settled beside Syne. He crossed his arms over his chest and said in a low voice, "Now to see if the Imperials are really stupid enough to fall for the same trick twice."

His tone implied that they wouldn't be. With typical caution, Yvolton had advised against using *Ralttir's* codes to try to sneak close to the supply depot. He'd advised against striking the Empire at all until some sort of alliance could be finalized with the Whiplash organization, but Syne and Slayke had overruled him. They'd both agreed that it was best to strike the Imperial fast after their success at N'zoth, before they had a chance to regroup and adjust tactics.

Wells pressed his earpiece with one hand as he shifted to look at Yvolton and Syne. "Sirs, planet control is telling us to hold in outer orbit while they prepare to service us."

Syne glanced at Yvolton. "What do you think?"

"I think they're calling for backup."

"Any outbound signals?" Syne asked Wells.

"None we've spotted, madam."

"Make sure they don't send any." She turned to the rest of the bridge. "Raise a jamming field. Guns, prepare a firing solution on the planetary base. Engines, drop us into closer range."

A chorus of assents bounces across the deck. She looked back at Yvolton and said, "I think we might as well call in backup."

"Agreed." Yvolton sounded a little relieved. He moved over to the comm station and gave orders to one of the other lieutenants.

Syne stalked toward the front of the bridge. The broad viewports combined with the recessed crew pits to provide an

unmistakable sense of power. It was like the entire command deck had been designed to fulfill the very Imperial vanity of its captain.

From her position high above the planet, she could see the drab brownss of a hemisphere in winter, and the cluster of angular gray patches that marked Ord Mirit's planetary supply depot. She saw, just barely, a blue flicker of light pass over the space.

"They've raised planetary shields," someone reported.

Just as she'd thought. She turned around and said, "Weapons, begin planetary bombardment."

"Madam," said the chief gunner, "With that shield up we won't be able to damage their facilities."

"We're keeping them on their toes, lieutenant. Track the incoming hostile capital ships and prepare a defensive firing pattern." She paced over to Yvolton and Wells and asked, "Is the jamming field online?"

"Yes, Madam," Wells nodded. "We sent the signal to *Leveler* as well."

"Very good." She shifted her attention to Yvolton. From the corner of her eye, she saw green lances of super-charged plasma fall into Ord Mirit's atmosphere.

"Madam," Yvolton lowered his voice, "How long do you plan to keep up the attack here?"

"Until we inflict sufficient damage," she said. "They didn't get an emergency signal out."

"That we know of. Madam, I suggest prioritizing a few select targets and-

"*Leveler* has arrived in-system," the tactical officer reported. "*Freedom Song* has arrived. *Plooriod Bodkin*. *Scarlet Thranta*. *White Wings*. *Black Dancer*. *Fat Bastard*. They're all here, sirs."

"Very good." Syne nodded. "Wells, get me a line to *Freedom Song*."

"One second, madam."

One second was all it took. Syne and Yvolton both leaned over Wells' shoulder as a flickering blue holographic miniature of Zozridor Slake appeared on the clone's console.

"Looks like they got the planetary shields up," Slayke said. He still sounded quite pleased.

"It appears our ID codes are no longer up-to-date," Syne admitted. "However, we believe we've jammed their distress signal."

"Well, good enough." Slayke crossed thick arms over his chest. "If you want to keep pounding the planet, we'll get those cruisers off your back."

"Please do."

"We'll send down some birds to check out the planet and see if they can poke a hole in those ground shields."

"We'd greatly appreciate that."

"I thought you would. Slayke, out."

The holo flickered off. Syne glanced at Wells and said, "Call Captain Madrisk. Tell him to take *Leveler* into low orbit and continue bombardment of the planet. If Slayke can drop those shields I want to vaporize the supply depot in two minutes."

Wells quickly took up the task. Syne stepped away from the comm station; Yvolton followed. Leaning over her, he said, "We shouldn't get too deep into the planet's gravity well. If reinforcements *do* show up, we don't want to get pinned down."

She gave a sharp sigh and said, "Captain Yvolton, I might remind you that my daughter is aboard this ship. I'm not risking her life unnecessarily. Or anyone else's."

Yvolton simply nodded and said nothing more; he knew when to be quiet.

This was the first time she'd taken Jadesei into battle; with Slayke bringing his whole fleet into this fight there was no other place for her to be. The infant was being watched over by Sajin and the doctors in *Valediction's* medical wing, which was probably the safest place in the whole flotilla. Nonetheless, the baby's presence lingered in the back of her mind, as did A'Sharad's notable absence.

Either of those two things could have driven her to dangerous distraction, but she'd learned long ago how to focus her attention in critical situations. The Bavinyar Defense Fleet hadn't had much of a navy, but her father had brought her on missions aboard his ship since she was barely a teenager. He'd drilled into her methods and

protocol until they'd become a part of her mental muscle memory, even if the only actual combat she'd seen before the Clone Wars had been one punitive action against a group of pirates.

She focused her attention on the tactical holo and let everything seep into her awareness: the two captured Imperial vessels slipping into lower orbit, Slayke's carrier disgorging its motley collection of starfighters, *Freedom Song* tackling both Carrack cruisers at once, *Plooriod Bodkin* and the gunships *White Wings* and *Black Dancer* driving back the assault carrier while the civilian supply ships tried to pull away to the far side of the planet. Two full squadrons of starfighters gave them chase, and Syne knew the civilian ships wouldn't last long.

She tried to remember if she'd ever felt compunction about destroying unarmed ships, even if they did belong to the enemy. She couldn't remember; maybe before the Clone Wars, before her father had been killed. As she'd told A'Sharad once, they weren't going to win the war by being merciful.

As it was, the sight of the first Imperial marker on the tactical holo blinking out filled her with pride.

Because her attention was drawn to the fleeing civilian ships, she was taken aback when Yvolton reported *White Wings* had been destroyed. The gunship had been small, with a crew of less than fifty, but every loss hurt their operation.

She quickly had Wells summon Slayke. When the captain's blue holo reappeared on the console, she asked, "What's the status of your ships?"

"We're holding our ground. That assault carrier packs a punch." Slayke sounded unusually tense.

"So does ours. I'll redirect Madrisk."

"We'd appreciate that."

"Did your fighter team reach the planet?"

"They've just located the shield generator. I told them to try and affect a bombing run immediately."

"Very good. *Leveler* is on her way."

After he shut off the holo, Wells didn't have to be told what to do next. Neither did Madrisk; the captain had been monitoring the

rest of the fight from *Leveler's* bridge and seemed eager to try out his new vessel in ship-to-ship combat.

Syne and Yvolton watched on the tactical holo as *Leveler* pulled out of lower orbit and began to engage the other assault carrier with a slow broadside pass. With *Plooriod Bodkin* and *Black Dancer* attacking its other side and a squadron of fighters from *Leveler* joining the fight, the enemy carrier was being squeezed so hard it was on the verge of popping.

Before it did, the tactical officer reported that Slayke's starfighters had managed to bring down the shield generator on the planet. A cheer went up over the bridge, and Syne gave Yvolton a slight nod. The captain called for everyone to calm down, and told the gunnery station to double current rate of fire on the planet below.

Yvolton looked visibly relieved as their destroyer began to pound the unprotected target below. Standing next to Syne, he said, "I had Tactical run through some calculations. It should take seven minutes of constant orbital bombardment to completely destroy the supply depot."

"Then we hold for seven minutes and pull out."

It was clearly the answer Yvolton had been hoping for, but he asked, "What about the remaining ships?"

Syne glanced toward the tactical holo. The carrier's shields were failing. *Freedom Song* had already destroyed one Carrack cruiser and the other was trying to flee.

"Any survivors will tell stories of our victory today," she said. "However, I don't expect many."

Yvolton glanced out the viewport, at the rain of green turbolaser energy stabbing down at the planet. "I imagine we'll get more airtime on this attack."

"Airtime?" she raised an eyebrow.

"The Imperial propaganda networks. Bavinyar was too much of an embarrassment. N'zoth was a classified installation. Ord Mirit, though, is just a supply depot with poor defenses. I'm sure they'll spin quite a story about what villains we are, killing so many helpless civilian contractors."

"They are not helpless," Syne said firmly. "And if the Empire calls me a villain, I'll be happy to take up the mantle."

Yvolton nodded. He'd clearly expected that reply.

The rest of the battle went surprisingly smoothly. The enemy assault carrier was battered until it began to fall downward to the planet. She began firing out escape pods, which Syne ordered to be left alone. The remaining Carrack cruiser was destroyed outright, as were a half-dozen more supply ships in orbit.

After about six minutes of orbital bombardment, the tactical officer reported that two *Venator*-class star destroyers had just arrived in outer orbit.

"Time to fall back," Syne said. "Guns, you've done your job. Cease firing. Engines, full sublight. Prep hyper-drives."

She had Wells patch in a quick call to Slayke. The captain's little holo seemed to bounce gleefully as he said, "I'd say we'll make Palps pretty mad. I'm pleased with how this one went."

"Can you get your ships to hyperspace before those destroyers arrive?"

"Won't be a problem. Are your ships safe?"

"They will be. Thank you for your help, Captain."

"Always happy for a chance to smack Palps in the backside. Or punch him in the face, same difference. *Freedom Song*, out."

Syne stepped away from the communications console and watched the forward viewport as Ord Mirit fell away. Stars and scattered engine-flares filled her vision. She watched as one flashed into lightheaded, then another and another. She saw *Freedom Song* jump, followed by *Leveler*. Then, finally, the stars stretched into infinity and *Valediction* made her triumphant fall-back into hyperspace.

She noticed Yvolton standing behind her. The old captain said, "That's two bloody noses we've given them in the course of a week. Any time now, they'll punch back."

"What are you suggesting, Andrein?" she said stiffly. "We hold back from now on?"

"No, but we need to admit we've been lucky so far."

Her father had said that luck was what weak beings used to excuse failure. For a long time, she'd believed him, but the past few years had thrown most of her old beliefs into confusion.

"If A'Sharad comes through, we won't just have luck on our side," she reminded him.

"No," Yvolton admitted. "We'll have a big target on our backs as well."

She didn't want to hear any more of Yvolton's pessimism, expected as it was. She stepped briskly off the bridge and went down to see her daughter.

* * *

Octavian Grant had just returned to his office on Farstine Station after a conference with the sector's planetary commissioners when he noticed the message he'd received. It had come in on his private encrypted channel and was marked of highest importance.

Grant sat down behind his carved-wood desk before bringing the message up on his datapad. It was from one of his paid informers on Anaxes and the contents were terse and simple: Jereveth Syne and Zozridor Slayke had just destroyed the supply depot on Ord Mirit with minimal losses to themselves.

It was what he'd been waiting for; he was only surprised that it had happened so soon. Now that it had, he knew he had to move quickly. He immediately called the landing bay and told them to prepare a hyperspace-capable shuttle. Next he gathered all of his material on the circumstances in the Tarkus System asteroid belt. Finally, he commed Captain Griff on *Majesty*.

The young man, shrunken to blue holographic form, snapped a smart salute. "Captain Griff reporting as ordered, Admiral."

Grant looked down on the holo with his hands clasped behind a stiff back. "Captain, unexpected circumstances have arisen. I am being called back to the Core on urgent fleet business."

"I see, sir." Griff just nodded acceptance.

"Captain, I am going to leave affairs at Farstine Station in your command until my return. You are to report directly to Moff Tarkin during my absence. Is that under-stood?"

Griff still didn't miss a beat. "Yes, sir."

"Excellent. Do you have any questions, Captain?"

Griff hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Admiral, do you know how long you will be gone?"

A very long time, he hoped. "That is undetermined. If my presence is required in the Core for an extended period, I'm sure Naval Command will assign a proper replacement to this sector."

"Of course, sir."

All in all, Griff was probably the best man to handle the sudden responsibility. Grant would be sure to follow his performance closely, no matter what he ended up doing in the Core.

He raised one hand and snapped a salute to meet Griff's. "Until we meet again, Captain. Admiral Grant, out."

He shut off the holo with his other hands and let his body slacken. He turned to see Farstine glowing brown mass turning slowly beneath him and wondered if he would ever see it again. He hoped not.

Grant was not a man to indulge in sentiment, but he did take a moment to run his fingers over the polished curves of his desk. He would have it sent to him wherever he ended up.

He took his hand off the desk, gathered his things, and marched out of his office without looking back. Ten minutes later his shuttle took flight, and three minutes after that it jumped to hyperspace, taking Octavian Grant back where he belonged.

* * *

Jereveth Syne knew most people considered her cold. That had been the case since she was a child, raised by a father who, even then, expected her to follow his footsteps and defend the people of Bavinyar. She didn't mind being seen as unfeeling; it even had its advantages.

It wasn't true, of course. When she held Jadesei in her arms she felt like her entire being was going to melt away into nothing. It was incredible how one tiny body, warm and weak, could dissolve her will and steal her thoughts with one look from its tiny squinting eyes.

After the battle she'd gone down to the medical wing to retrieve her child. She'd allowed Sajin to carry Jadesei through the corridors, back to the captain's quarters, but she insisted on taking the baby through the threshold. Sajin had bid her farewell with a tight, almost amused smile on her face, and when the door slid shut Jereveth Syne was alone with her infant daughter.

She carried the child to the sofa and sat down, still cradling her against her chest. As she looked into Jadesei's eyes her thoughts went back to her father, who'd also had a reputation for being cold, but whose eyes so often went soft and a little wet when he looked at his own daughter.

She knew A'Sharad was worried that he was walking in the path of his own father. Like Gregor Syne, Sharad Hett had fought bravely for his child and for his people, only to lose his life and leave the child an orphan. Syne didn't believe history repeated itself, but she'd become afraid that it could; A'Sharad was rubbing off on her.

After a minute or ten and staring down at Jadesei, enraptured by her little eyes and gummy mouth and pink grasping little fingers, her private communications array sounded. A message had come, triple-encrypted. Only one person could be the sender.

Syne remained seated with Jadesei and picked up the comm array's remote control. After inputting her code, the blue holo-image of A'Sharad Hett appeared over the room's central table.

"Hello, A'Sharad," she smiled slightly.

"It's good to see both of you," Hett nodded. "Is the battle finished?"

"It was a great success. We gave Palpatine another bloody nose. Or a swat on the backside, if you'd prefer."

"Glad to hear it." Hett crossed his arms over his chest. "Jereveth, I'm on Metellos. I've made contact with the Whiplash representatives."

"Have you told Slayke about this?"

"Not yet."

"A'Sharad, what is it?"

"Things didn't go as expected."

She didn't understand what Hett meant; he didn't seem physically harmed. "What happened?"

"Whiplash sent a group of people. Their leader is... a Jedi."

"That's wonderful news," Syne said, and meant it.

"Jereveth, while we were meeting *another* Jedi joined us. Well, a padawan."

"I never imagined Metellos was a hot-spot for Force users."

"She followed me. I'd met her before, at Bavinyar. She was with Master Altis."

That was a name Syne hadn't heard spoken aloud in months. In the beginning, immediately after Bavinyar, Syne and Slayke had stayed in contact with the old rogue Jedi Master. They'd needed places to scatter nearly one million Bavinyari refugees, and Altis had helped them find out-of-the-way planets on the edge of or even outside Imperial space. In particular, he had directed them toward the Dorneans, who were still resisting Imperial expansion and had been happy to take several hundred thousand refugees, many of them fit for fighting.

A few months ago, communications with Altis had abruptly stopped. None of their intel sources reported the Jedi Master captured, but that didn't mean anything. Slowly, quietly, Syne had accepted that Altis was gone for good, though she didn't think Hett had rid himself of all hope.

Hett continued, "This padawan, Scout, says Master Altis has been captured. So have two others, including Kina Ha, the old Kaminoan I told you about."

"I remember them" Syne nodded.

"Jereveth, she wants us to help rescue them."

She could hear it in his voice: he wanted her to tell him no. He wanted an excuse. He wanted to be back with his wife and daughter.

The desperation, however restrained, made her feel uncomfortable; it felt out-of-character from the brave man she

loved. She sidestepped the issue and asked, "What about Whiplash? Did they agree to further meetings?"

"They told me how to contact their leader, Thi Xon Yimmon. I'll send you the encoded instructions once this message is done."

"I'm sure Slayke will be glad to hear it."

"Jereveth, the Whiplash people I've met, they're going to be the ones who go after the Jedi prisoners."

"Do they know how or where?"

"Scout says the Empire has been taking Force-sensitive prisoners into the Deep Core. She's not sure exactly where, only that they're routed through the Empress Teta System and shipped someplace else after that."

That reinforced what Syne had already believed. "A'Sharad, it's important we scope out as much of the Deep Core as possible. The Emperor is doing something important in there. I'd like to stop it if we can."

Hett nodded reluctantly. "What about Yimmon?"

"Slayke and I will set up a meeting with him. If you have a chance to explore whatever the Empire's doing in the Deep Core, you should take it."

He nodded again. "If those are your orders, I'll carry them out."

Syne frowned. She didn't like pulling rank on him and he knew it. "As you can see, Jadesei is fine. I *will* protect her. You shouldn't doubt that."

"I don't," Hett said defensively. "I just don't like being far away from her, or from you."

"The feeling is mutual, but we have jobs to do, both of us." She was being cold again, without even meaning to. She really did have a lot of her father in her. Softening her tone, she added, "We need to learn all we can about the Deep Core. We also owe Altis a debt."

"I know."

"And they *are* Jedi. A single one is valuable, now more than ever."

"I understand. I'll go with them."

"Thank you, A'Sharad. I'll talk to Slayke about everything. If we can find some intel about where the Jedi might have been taken, I'll let you know."

"Good. Thank you."

"We'll be in touch, A'Sharad. Don't worry."

"I'm not," he said stiffly. She knew he was lying.

"I'll see you again soon," she said, and ended the transmission with a light touch of the remote.

She settled back into the sofa and held Jadesei a little tighter. The child began to whine and struggle in her arms but she didn't move to sooth her. She just closed her eyes and tried to freeze that final blue, blurred image of A'Sharad's face in her mind.

Despite the assurances she'd just given him, it somehow felt very important.

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"Scout showing up derailed whatever plans we'd had before, which admittedly weren't much. They also meant that we were about to go diving into the unknown. None of us knew what we'd find there, not even the girl who'd appeared from nowhere and set us on this crazy new quest."

For the first time in weeks, Scout felt safe. Feeling safe felt weird, and she couldn't allow herself to relax, even as she sat in the hold of Jax Pavan's ship, a light freighter called *Laranth*, surrounded by beings she knew instinctively she could trust, even though they were all strangers.

They were all gathered in the hold, seated in a big circle. Across from Scout, Jax Pavan sat cross-legged on top of a storage crate. To his left was his squat Sullustan companion, Den Dhur; to his left, the Zabrak woman Magash. Next to Magash sat Sacha, the tall human with the mechanical eye, and next sat A'Sharad Hett. Despite his big frame, sulking expression, fierce-looking facial tattoos, and twin lightsabers, Scout didn't sense anything threatening from him. If anything, he felt strangely distant, as though he wanted to be someplace else.

The only one Scout couldn't get a good grip on, through the Force or through simply watching them, was the human-looking being sitting between Sacha and herself. The others called him I-

Five, like he was a droid, but he acted like any normal sentient. There was something slightly awkward in his motions, though, something stiff in his face. She'd seen holos of human replica droids before and this was a dead-ringer for those, but at the same time she could definitely feel *something* coming from it, or him, in the Force. It was a faint presence but a presence nonetheless, as distinct and singular as anyone else's.

Under Master Altis, she'd learned new ways of using the Force to interact with non-organic objects. Some of Altis' people were far better than her and could use their powers to directly interface with advanced computers. Still, using the Force to touch a machine was very different from a machine touching the Force.

If this being *was* a human replica droid, and it *still* possessed the Force, well, Scout was going to have to spend a lot of time thinking about that.

Right now, time was something she didn't have.

"Before the Empire caught up with us," she explained, "We were trying to track Imperial movement into the Deep Core. We knew they'd set up some base for their Inquisitors in there, and when we looked into it more, we found a lot of other material being shipped past the Empress Teta system. A *lot* more."

"We've noticed a lot of that too," A'Sharad Hett said, referring to Syne's organization. He asked, "What *we* are you talking about? Were you with Master Altis the whole time?"

She nodded. "Djinn Altis. Kina Ha. Some of his other Jedi too."

"But you scattered after Bavinyar?"

Scout nodded. "Djinn found a place that would refit the component ships of *Chu'unthor* with hyperdrive engines. He split us up that way, scattered us like Skirata told us to. Djinn went a separate way from any of the three *Chu'unthor* ships. I went with him."

"*Chu'unthor*?" Jax frowned.

"Not the old academy ship," Hett explained. "A new one Master Altis used as a home base for his... splinter group."

"I only heard a little about Altis," Jax said. "I knew he never went to the Temple because of some... differences with Yoda, but I never knew much beyond that."

"He allows Jedi to have families," Scout said. "To marry. To love."

Den and Sacha raised their eyebrows in surprise but Jax seemed to take all that in stride, just like she had. Love, at least the romantic kind, was something she still didn't understand, but something told her Jax, like Hett, had some experience with it.

Scout may not have known romance, but after her time with Kal Skirata's Mandalorian clan, and then with Altis, she'd come to know what families were like. The thought of her own family locked away on some Inquisitor's prison ship was a constant vice around her heart.

"How was Altis captured?" Hett asked.

Scout swallowed. The memory was still sharp, harsh, biting. "We were in the Outer Rim, actually, visiting Lucazec. Me, Djinn, and a few more. Ash Jarvee. Maybe you remember her."

Hett nodded slightly.

"One of the *Chu'unthor* ships was hiding there. Kina Ha was leading that group. I'm sure you remember her." She glanced at Jax and the others and explained, "Kina Ha is a Kaminoan Jedi Master. A very powerful one, and a *very* old one. Almost a thousand years."

"A thousand years?" Den sounded incredulous. "I don't know much about Kaminoans, but they don't live *that* long, do they?"

"I think she was a genetic experiment for her people. They tried to give her long life and accidentally gave her the Force too. Anyway, we were meeting with Kina Ha's group on Lucazec when the Imperials showed up."

She swallowed, looked down at her hands. It was still hard to think about: the flash of laserfire in the night, the clashing of lightsaber blades, the smoke and smell of scorched flesh. Worst of all had been the *fear* that overwhelmed her, right when the people she cared about needed her the most.

Sensing her difficulty, Sacha asked, "Did anyone else manage to escape?"

"Just me." Scout didn't look up. "The Inquisitors, the clone troopers, they killed the rest. Everybody except Djinn, Ash, and Kina Ha."

"How did they find you?" Hett asked.

"I don't know. Maybe one of the locals on Lucazec ratted us out."

"Do you know for sure that they'll be taken to the Deep Core?" asked I-Five.

"That's where the Inquisitors take prisoners. That's what we've heard anyway."

"I don't want to sound harsh," Den said, "But if we want to save your friends we don't have a lot to go on."

"We'll find something," Jax said firmly. "We have contacts we can talk to. A network of informants. If they can find out anything to help us, they will."

"Thanks," Scout nodded soberly. "I'm sorry for barging into your business like this. I just... I need to help those people."

"You don't need to explain," Sacha said softly.

But she did. She'd spent the past week frantically on the run, afraid of everyone and everything, painfully alone after months of being with people whom she trusted and even loved like she never had before. "I spent so long wanting to be a *part* of something. Wanting to belong. I found that with Djinn's people. I needed them, but when they needed me, I failed them."

"From what you told us," I-Five said, "There was nothing you could have done."

She squeezed her eyes shut and saw it in the black: the smoke, the laser-flashes, the sparks of clashing sabers in the night. She saw the face of the Inquisitor who'd charged her, snarling and lit red by the glow of his lightsaber. She saw the blue-lit face of the Jedi who'd come to rescue her because she'd been too frightened and weak to kill the man trying to kill her. Blue blade and red blade had crossed and clashed and their wielders had killed each other, and Scout had never even known the name of the one who'd died protecting her.

All her life she'd depended on other people to save her, stronger and better people, from Master Yoda all the way down to Djinn's

nameless disciple. In all that time, she'd always been the one being saved and never the one saving others, like a real Jedi should.

But as she'd known for a while, she wasn't much of a Jedi.

"I could have done more," she said, quiet as a whisper.

"You *will* do more," Jax said firmly. She looked up at him, saw the conviction in his eyes, and almost believed him. She suddenly understood how this one young Jedi had drawn such a miss-match of people into his orbit. Just being around him made her feel stronger.

"Where do we start?" asked Scout.

"I recommend we get off Metellos," Den said. "Three Jedi are harder to track in space than sitting on a planet."

"Agreed," said I-Five. "We should call Whiplash too."

"I'll take care of that," Jax nodded. "Sacha, can you start pre-flight checks?"

"No problem," Sacha nodded.

"Good." Jax shifted his attention to only Jedi Master in the room. "Master Hett, I understand if you need to get back to your people."

"I've already talked to them. I'm to stay with you."

He didn't seem especially pleased about it. Scout wondered why; she'd only met him briefly before the fight at Bavinyar and had never understood his full connection with Syne and her people.

"I'm glad to hear that," Jax said. "Do you have your own ship?"

"An R-41 Starchaser," Hett nodded.

"What about you, Scout?" asked Den.

"I hitched a ride on a shuttle," she said. "If I can stay with you here-"

"Won't be a problem." Sacha smiled. "You can share a room with me and Magash."

The Zabrak woman, who'd been watching the whole conversation silently and intently until now, said, "I am *not* abandoning my bunk."

Sacha patted her shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll set up another for our new roomie."

Magash nodded dutifully. Scout smiled despite herself. The strange collection of beings Jax Pavan had gathered around himself seemed like a family in itself, a collection of friendships and quirks and foibles. She felt like she could belong with these people, too, if they made it through whatever lay ahead.

"We should get moving," I-Five said. "We've got a lot of stuff to do."

"Agreed." Jax unfolded his legs and stood up, effectively ending the meeting.

Sacha popped up too and said to Scout, "Come on, I'll show you the new digs. We can probably make something work."

With that she took Scout by the arm and pulled her down one corridor. Behind them, Jax called, "Don't forget those pre-flight checks!"

"Aye aye, Captain," Sacha said, but didn't look back.

* * *

Jax watched the three women disappear down the hallway. Scout was clearly confused, frightened, and bewildered by everything that had happened to her. Jax had no idea what had specifically happened on Lucazec, but he'd been through Order 66, and he knew that combination of guilt and shock first-hand.

As much as he was worried about Scout, he couldn't let himself be distracted right now. He turned his attention to Den and I-Five. "You two should check the supplies. Make sure we're good to go. We might be in transit for a long time."

"Not a problem," I-Five nodded. "If there anything *else* we should get?"

"Like what?" Jax frowned.

"Weapons," Hett said simply.

Jax sighed. A'Sharad Hett exuded the atmosphere of a warrior, but he didn't consider anything on his own group to be battle-hardened. Sacha had cut down in Inquisitor once, but only after taking him by surprise. Magash was the only one he'd trust in a fight if things got really nasty.

But, he reminded himself, they were about to walk into some top-secret Inquisitor stronghold to rescue ultra-valuable prisoners. A fight was coming whether he wanted one or not.

"Okay," he said, "You two, scope around the spaceport for some cheap weapons. But be back here in one hour. I want to take off soon."

"Won't be a problem," Den patted I-Five on the arm. "Come on, let's pretend we're dastardly rogues."

"I'm not sure we're pretending anymore."

Jax watched Den and I-Five as they exited the ship. He glanced sidelong at Hett and noticed the Jedi Master was watching them too, with a look of mild confusion on his face.

"I-Five's a droid," Jax said. "But he's also more than that."

"I can *sense* it in the Force," Hett said. "Faint, but still distinct, just like any living being. How is that *possible*?"

"I don't know. It's a long story, but I-Five used to belong to my father."

"Your father?" Something tightened in Hett's face.

"I-Five found me right after Order Sixty-Six, saying he wanted to protect me. I thought he was malfunctioning at first, but he's unique. He's a person, as much as you or me. As for my father, I never met him. He died when I was small and I was raised in the Temple since I was a baby, just like everybody else."

"No," Hett said, "Not like everybody else."

Jax's thoughts flicked back to Anakin Skywalker, and then to the black-encased monster Anakin had become, but from the distant look in Hett's eyes, he realized that the older man, too, must have taken an unorthodox path to the Jedi Order.

Hett saw the questions in his eyes and warding them off. "I've never heard of a droid having a Force signature, even a very... unique one. It shouldn't be possible."

"I don't understand it either," Jax said. "But there's a lot of things I don't understand. Until an hour ago I thought I was the last Jedi in the galaxy. I have to admit, it's a little overwhelming."

Hett didn't smile. "You seemed to have found potential Jedi of your own. The Zabrak, she's very strong, but untrained."

"She *was* trained, by the Dathomiri witches. I'm trying to train her in something different. She's making progress, but it's hard."

"And your pilot. She has the Force too. Fainter and untrained, but it's there."

"I know. With Sacha, I'm not sure if I can make a Jedi out of her, or anything close. If she'd been trained when she was younger maybe, but she'd not as naturally strong as you or me, or Magash."

"She seems a little like Scout," Hett said. "In terms of raw strength."

"I thought the same thing. I hope the two of them get along. That girl needs all the support she can get right now."

"Have you given your people the rendezvous coordinates?"

Jax blinked. The sudden change in topic had taken him aback. "Not yet. I'm going to call them now and tell them everything."

"Good. We can't let rescuing Altis derail what we both came here for."

"You want to get back to your people," Jax said. It wasn't a question. Even Force-less Den Dhur could have read that on the Jedi Master's tattooed face.

Hett looked at him carefully, as if weighing how much to say. "You didn't seem taken aback when you heard about Master Altis, and the kind of group he's been running."

Just like that, it all made sense. Hett had his guard up through the Force, and Jax hadn't understood why until now.

"Do you have someone you want to get back to? Some-one important?"

Hett nodded stiffly.

"I understand that," Jax wrapped his arms around himself. "And I don't judge you either. There isn't a Jedi Order anymore. The rules are different. I had... someone I loved too."

He couldn't keep the pain of memory from his face, or from the Force. Hett asked, "She died?"

"Her name was Laranth." Jax looked around the hold of her namesake ship. "We weren't together very long. At least, not *together*, the way we should have been from the start."

"I'm sorry." Hett's voice scraped. Something seeping into his Force presence. Jax thought it was fear, fear of losing the person he now loved.

"It was hard, after she died. Maybe the hardest time of my life." Harder, even, than the aftermath of Order 66, when his Master and all his friends were slaughtered. "I went to dark places then. But I'm better now. I try to do what she would have wanted me to do."

"I have a daughter," Hett said. He was staring off into the bulkhead.

Jax didn't know what to say to that. Children were something he'd never even had to consider. He and Laranth hadn't even been capable of having children biologically.

"Once this is over, we'll get you back to your family," Jax said. It was all he could say.

Hett blinked, shook his head. "We have to rescue Altis first. And Ash. And Kina Ha. I bet she's the one the Emperor wants the most."

Jax frowned. "Why is that?"

"They say Sith fear death. Darth Bane, Darth Annedhu, they've all tried to extend their lifespans beyond natural range."

Jax saw his point. "If I were Darth Sidious, I'd be pretty interested in a Kaminoan with super longevity."

"It's probably the only reason they didn't kill everyone on Lucazec, Scout included."

Jax licked dry lips. "Well. At least we know what we're we're getting into."

"No we don't. Not yet."

"I get your point. I'll call Whiplash and tell them everything."

"And I'll get to my ship. You have my comm frequency?"

"We do. We'll let you know when we're ready for takeoff. *Laranth* has an airlock, so you should be able to dock your *Starchaser* and board once we're in space."

"Good to know." Hett started for the door, but turned around and said, "Call me when the hour's up."

Jax nodded. Hett nodded back. He watched the Jedi Master walk down the landing ramp and out into the hangar and wondered

if he could ever understand what Hett, or Scout, had been through. Jedi were supposed to have a deep bond with each other but he felt closer to Den, I-Five, and the others than with the two Jedi survivors who'd miraculously stepped through his door.

But that was something else he'd ponder later. He had a call to make.

* * *

After the whirlwind of one Jedi showing up, and then another, walking through some seedy back alleys on Metellos with I-Five looking through gun shops felt surprisingly, well, normal.

In the end, we picked up two fancy long-range Verpine rifles and two Blastech hold-out pistols from a shop run by a Frozian with his half his fur burned off. Despite his looks and line of work, he was surprisingly polite and even wrapped up our new purchases so that nobody would know we were walking around with a bunch of illegal weapons, not that anybody would have cared.

Guns were never my specialty. At all. It was I-Five who did the selection of merchandise while I handled the price negotiations, so I didn't feel totally useless. Still, as we walked back to *Laranth*, I asked him where he picked up his knowledge of weapons.

"I'm not sure." I-Five tilted his head slightly like he was thinking. He'd never done that in his old body, but in his HRD he put more effort into mimicking human body language.

"Is it something Jax's father used to deal with?"

"Very likely," the droid said, "Though Lorn didn't specialize in gun-running. I don't think he liked it very much either."

"It sounds like he made a life out of dealing, you know, *illicit* substances."

"He didn't trade spice either," I-Five said defensively. "Mostly information and rare objects."

"Like Sith holocrons?" I said, referring to Darth Ramage's blood-fueled record-keeping device. Jax had carried that thing around for a long time and it hadn't ceased to creep me out. I was glad when he left it with the witches on Dathomir.

"That was a rarity too," I-Five said.

"And super-unique sentient protocol droids that also have the Force?"

"Apparently," I-Five deadpanned.

"How does that work? I mean, if Jax can sense you in the Force, can you sense-"

"Nothing. We tried a little but I don't even know where to begin." I-Five sounded regretful. "For all we know I might exist *in* the Force but not be able to touch it."

"Like me."

"Exactly. Anyway, Jax has been concentrating on Magash lately, since she shows more natural potential than me or Sacha."

"Is that a touch of jealousy I hear?"

"Of course not," I-Five snapped, a little too fast.

I was amused by that. In fact, it actually, irrationally, made me feel better about the crazy journey we were about to embark on. I'll admit that, when Jax first showed up and I-Five followed him around like a little lost puppy, I felt a little jealous. Or a lot jealous. I never said I was perfect. For I-Five to be acting the same way now made me feel a little better about myself.

I shifted my shoulder and adjusted the strap for the bag full of Verpine rifles. "Who's actually going to shoot these things?"

"I was going to look into the encyclopedia in *Laranth's* computer core once we get back and download basic sharpshooting protocols."

"You can do that? Really?"

"The core has all the information Whiplash gathered after the war, from star charts to subroutines for Techno Union battle droids. It shouldn't be hard to adjust those subroutines for my program."

I whistled. "And just like that you're a walking weapon. I wish I could just open my brain and add whatever I wanted."

"It's not that simple. It's taken me a lot of time and practice to learn how to edit my own program."

"Still, it's easier for you than a poor meat-sack like me."

"I know. But sometimes I feel..."

He trailed off. I asked, "Feel what?"

"I feel like my program is getting harder to modify. It's almost as if the more I add to it, the... heavier it becomes. it's very hard to describe."

"You mean the older you get, the harder it is to change?"

"That's a very metaphorical way of putting it."

"Not for a meat-sack. What if you try to mod your own program so, say, you forget everything about Lorn Pavan, and everything about his son. What then?"

"I don't know. So much of my memory data is about the Pavans, not to mention most of my programming modifications have either been done by Lorn or for Jax."

"You lost your memory of Lorn before."

"I know. It should have been wiped forever, but it wasn't. It was still deep within my data core, waiting to be uncovered."

"So no matter what, even if you tried really hard to modify your own program, you'd never forget Jax or Lorn?"

"I don't know." I-Five's voice actually wavered a little, like he was troubled by the thought. "Frankly, I don't want to find out."

"Then maybe you should take it easy with the whole modify-your-own-program stuff."

"And give up my edge over meat sacks like you? Unlikely."

By then the hangar structure loomed over the bobbing heads in the crowd. I sighed and said, "That's why I keep hanging around you, I-Five. Always humble."

"And I couldn't manage without your optimism, Den."

We didn't say anything else on the way back to *Laranth*, but I felt little better than I had when we'd left.

* * *

Since the ravaging of Whiplash after the failed assassination attempt on Palpatine, the organization had gone through a lot of major changes, and Pol Haus had been the one to do most of them.

For a while, the Whiplash headquarters had been located in an underground maglev train. At first they'd just had a metaphorical Underground Maglev for secretly transporting dissidents on and off

Coruscant; then, largely thanks to Tuden Sal's ingenuity, they'd recovered an actual disused train that ran through the neglected underbelly of Imperial City. The train had been constantly in motion, and therefore very hard to find unless you'd been given a specific time and place to meet it. They'd held all their meetings on that train and stored all their equipment there too, including the transceiver they used for double-encrypted communication with Whiplash cells on other worlds.

Well, the train was gone now. After Sal and Haus' traitorous lieutenant Droosh had shot each other during a confrontation on the train, he'd been forced to dispose of it, lest ISB agents or anyone else find it. A maglev train was a hard thing to lose, but you could do just about anything with money, and Haus had been able to access the surprisingly well-stocked accounts of deceased Whiplash leader Dyat Agni.

As a police prefect he also had a variety of interesting connections. One of those, a Toydarian named Keela, ran a construction firm that also helped Black Sun and other organizations quietly dispose of certain refuse, both organic and mechanical. Dyat's money and Keela's smelter facilities had been a sufficient combination to make sure no one ever saw that maglev train again.

As for Sal and Droosh's bodies, Haus had seen to the grisly task of casting them into the black abyss beneath Imperial City. The less Keela knew, the better.

The maglev might have been gone, but the communications equipment was one of the things Haus had salvaged before sending the train to Keela. It was his only secure link to Yimmon and the rest of Whiplash. That kind of sophisticated equipment couldn't just be stashed anywhere, though, and in the end he'd decided to install it in the place he felt was safest: his own flat.

Pol Haus was not a man who lived in luxury, nor was he a man who had guests over often. He'd been living in the same modest two-room apartment in the Zi-Kree Sector's middle-class neighborhood for almost ten years, and in that time he'd already made certain modifications to the place, added armored doors and

extra security monitors. He'd installed them before the Clone Wars but after the police prefect from the neighboring sector was found murdered in his bed, probably by Black Sun, though the culprits had never been identified.

As often happened nowadays, his habitual paranoia was coming in handy. He installed the maglev's communications system beneath the floor in his flat, then moved his bed over the floor. He knew he looked like an idiot every night when he got home, dropped onto his fat belly and crawled under the bed to check if he'd gotten any messages, but it wasn't like anyone was there to see him embarrass himself.

Normally communications with the other Whiplash cells took place at pre-arranged times. Since Haus' work hours were very unpredictable, the calls usually came very early in the morning, when he was likely to be either getting home from the office or heading out.

He was, therefore, immediately alarmed when the communicator started chiming four hours before dawn. The noise jerked him upright in his bed. He swore, fumbled the light on, tried to crawl under the bed, painfully bumped his horn, swore again, and finally shoved the bed over to the wall and crouched over the console.

With the flick of a button, the blue holo-image of Jax Pavan appeared in front of him.

Pavan immediately frowned. "Prefect Haus, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Haus rubbed his horn and tried to flatten the scowl on his face. "You just caught me at a bad time."

"Sorry. I know I was supposed to report in a couple hours, but this can't wait."

Bad news always seemed to come in the middle of the night. "Did you meet with the envoy?"

"We did. I already sent the information to Yimmon. He's supposed to meet Syne and Slayke in the Sarillion system in three days."

"Never heard of it."

"It's on the edge of the Koornacht Cluster and the Deep Core, facing the Unknown Regions. There's only one planet and it's a gas giant that used to be used for Tibanna mining a long time ago. Nobody goes there any more."

It sounded like a decent choice, but if everything had gone according to plan, Pavan wouldn't have woke him up like this. "What else happened?"

"We had a party-crasher." Before Haus could say anything, Pavan held up both hands. "It's okay, she's a Jedi. Syne's envoy is too, actually."

That sounded like a ridiculous coincidence. Haus didn't trust coincidence. "Are you sure she's telling the truth?"

"I can tell, trust me."

He didn't trust Jedi magic either. "She might have been followed."

"She wasn't. Haus, she needs our help. There's other Jedi, including several powerful masters, who have been captured by the Empire."

It fell into place quickly. "You want to rescue them."

"We *have* to rescue them. If Palpatine gets them, everyone loses."

"Well, what did you call me for?"

"The Inquisitorius has them. We think they're being transferred to some Inquisitor base in the Deep Core, someplace past the Empress Teta System."

Empress Teta was one of the few populated, accessible worlds in the Deep Core. Beyond that were densely-packed stars, black holes, nebulae, and other kinds of navigational hazards. Poking around looking for planets in the Deep Core was a good way to get yourself burned up; sane pilots only flew in if they knew exactly what route to take.

"I told Yimmon this too," Pavan said. "He's putting his intel on it. But I think you'd have a better chance at it."

"I can't just stroll into Imperial Palace and ask some Inquisitor where their secret base is."

"I know, but you have connections. Please, just poke around, and do it fast. We don't have much time. The Emperor could have them already for all we know."

"The prisoners might not even *be* in the Deep Core."

"I know. They could be on Coruscant. But you'd know that, wouldn't you?"

Haus sighed. "You're asking a lot."

"It's critical. Maybe even more than the meeting at Sarillion. Please, call in some favors."

"This might require calling in *all* my favors."

"Whatever it takes."

The grimness in Pavan's voice, in his blurred blue holographic face, said everything. Haus relented, "Okay, I'll see what I can do. I'll make up some excuse not to go to work today."

"Thanks. Whenever you get anything, anything at *all*, call me on *Laranth*."

"I will. Anything else?"

"Not right now."

"Okay. I'll call you later today, no matter what."

"Thanks. Pavan, out."

The holo-image abruptly died. Haus sat back on his bedroom floor, rubbed his horn, and sighed. Through the drawn translucent curtains of his bedroom window he could see the lights of Coruscant's skyline, but no hint of dawn.

He sighed, got to his feet, and staggered over to his closet. He might as well get dressed and get working on Pavan's project early. It wasn't like he was going to sleep again after that.

11

"At the time, it felt like the whole galaxy was being swept away by a flood of Imperial fervor. It seemed like so many beings had become wrapped up in the ideology Palpatine presented of a strong, unified, militarized, pro-human society. But when he died, it all came tumbling down instantly. The Emperor's loyal generals and admirals turned around and started fighting each other for little scraps of territory. It only really then that we realized what had been true all along: There was no ideology to the Empire, no unity. It was just a place where men who wanted power could climb over each other's backs to get it, no matter what they had to do."

The fact that Octavian Grant was willingly sitting down at one of Anaxes' finest officer's clubs with Commodore Demetrius Zaarin was yet another indicator of the bizarre twists his life had taken recently.

To his credit, Zaarin wasn't acting as insufferable as he usually did. He'd selected a genuinely fine brandy and pointed out the best nerf steak on the menu. For most of the meal Zaarin talked and Grant listened. The Commo-dore went on and on about the roll-out of his new TIE/In starfighter model, his close relationship with Raith Sienar, and future modifications he had planned for the TIE fighter.

"It's a modular design," Zaarin was saying, "Which means small modifications can be made easily to great effect. Re-designed solar panels would bring greater effectiveness in atmosphere, for example. A second pod could be added for hauling passengers or payload. Additional laser cannons or even projectile hardpoints could be installed."

"Wouldn't that decrease maneuverability?" asked Grant. He didn't particularly care, but it seemed as though Zaarin had designed his starfighter to be as lightweight, cheap and disposable as possible.

"Every gain requires some trade-off," Zaarin said. "The same will happen when we install shield generators."

"Shields?" Grant raised an eyebrow. "All this time I thought you were *intentionally* putting pilots into flying deathtraps."

"Don't be snide, Octavian, it doesn't suit you."

"So are you the Emperor's top point man on starfighter design? Are you standing at the pinnacle of our military-industrial complex or are there other techs masquerading as senior naval officers?"

Zaarin let the insult slide off his back. "Well, I'm not the *only* one. Martio Batch, have you heard of him? No? Used to work in R&D during the war, had some input on the ARC-170. He has some interesting ideas and a good team of engineers behind him. He's not very good at drawing attention to himself, though."

"If only he could learn from your example."

Zaarin smiled. "Goodness, you're even more bitter than I remembered. Is Farstine really that bad?"

"Only when I had no hope of escape." Grant took a sip of wine.

Zaarin raised an eyebrow. "So you're saying that's changed, has it? What *are* you doing here, Octavian? Did you get official leave to come to Anaxes or did you just desert your post?"

"I had leave time. I took it."

"And Tarkin was okay with that?"

"There's nothing happening in that corner of space. Nothing at *all*."

"No, but I heard things are getting tense in the Western Reaches again. More Sep hold-outs that don't know when to quit. I heard they're making alliances with some pirate gangs."

"The Western Reaches aren't the Empire's biggest concern at the moment."

"No. Your old friends seem to be." Zaarin stuffed the last bit of nerf steak into his mouth, chewed, swallowed. A little juice trickled down the side of his mouth. "Is that what you're here for, Octavian? You're trying to get permission to go after Syne again?"

"I told you before that we'd meet again, and it would be for the last time."

To his surprise, Zaarin started laughing. "You really *are* taking this personally, aren't you? Well, why shouldn't you? That little waif *did* totally humiliate you. Twice. Or was it three times? I lost count."

"The Syne situation clearly isn't being handled properly. As the officer with the most experience against the Syne family, it's only natural that I offer my knowledge and advice."

"Oh, it's more than that and we both know it." Zaarin leaned forward and smiled. "Everyone always says you've got ice in your veins and a rod up your butt, Octavian. I'm glad to see you've got some fire in the belly too. There's nothing like revenge to get a man out of bed in the morning."

Grant rolled his eyes. "Are you done analyzing my character or do I have to listen to more?"

"That depends. You were the one who wanted to talk to *me*, remember? Frankly, I couldn't believe it. I still don't. What are you up to, Octavian?"

Grant leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands clasped in front of him. "I'm going to talk to Admiral Screed tomorrow. What can you tell me about him?"

Zaarin frowned. "What's there to tell? Everyone knows Screed. Decorated Judicial, hero of the Battle of Anaxes, battle-scarred veteran, one-eyed face of the Imperial Navy, et cetera. I can see why you want to woo him. As admiral of the Home Fleet he's got more pull with Palpatine than anybody except Vader, Pestage, and *maybe* Jerec."

"Jerec?" Grant frowned.

"You haven't heard about that? One of his so-called High Inquisitors. Heard he used to be a Jedi Master before he switched sides. Seen him on Anaxes once or twice. He flits around. I heard he's developing a close relationship with Ardus Kaine."

Grant mostly remembered Jerec as the one who'd trained Ameesa Darys, the frightening young woman attached to his command during the missions at Belsavis and Bavinyar. When he'd learned she'd died aboard *Valediction* he'd felt almost relieved. Now he felt anything but; running into a master that could well blame him for the student's death could be very unpleasant.

Grant didn't want to get distracted. "My concern is Screed now. What *else* can you tell me?"

Zaarin frowned deeper. "I don't understand what you're after."

"Of course you do. Everyone knows Terrinald Screed, the proud, battered war hero. What is he *really*?"

Zaarin leaned in a little closer and lowered his voice. "What have you heard?"

"Rumors, mostly. Private credit accounts. Government funds shifted to dubious programs with no real oversight." Grant dropped to a whisper. "Slaves."

A look of uncharacteristic gravity darkened Zaarin's face. After a moment of hesitation, he said, "I don't know anything for sure."

"A man like you hears things. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

"As Admiral of the Home Fleet, Screed had announced several R&D projects, which is perfectly in his authority."

"What kind of R&D?"

"New weapon designs. Improved shielding. Nothing that will change the scope of warfare. The amount of funding he puts into those projects is... quite disproportional."

"And you say there's no oversight at all?"

"Nothing like what my projects get. But that's just what I can tell. It could all be cover for something highly classified."

"Or he could just be fleecing the government. What else?"

"There were also some rumors after the subjugation of Kashyyyk." Zaarin looked down, like he was afraid to even say it. "They say Screed managed to personally secure transit for almost a hundred thousand Wookiee slaves."

Grant had heard similar rumors. "What happened to them?"

"No one knows."

"Sold on the black market?"

"I said no one knows," Zaarin scowled.

He seemed genuinely upset. Grant could understand why; Terrinald Screed was being held up as the utter exemplar of everything the New Order wanted its officers to be. If any of these corruption allegations were proven it would create a crisis of conscience in the Imperial Navy. That might have been why it was allowed to go on as a secret instead of a scandal.

"Have there been any inquiries into Screed's actions, formal or otherwise?"

"Not that I know of," said Zaarin. "It's also been said that Screed's been constructing his own private penthouse in Imperial City. I don't need to tell you how much *that* would cost."

"So the signs are all there," Grant muttered.

Zaarin's eyes shifted up. "What are you planning. Octavian? Are you going to try and blackmail your way back into the fight? You won't get far without proof and nobody's been able to find anything so far. Whatever Screed's doing, he knows how to cover his tracks."

Grant said nothing more. He just leaned back in his chair and took another gulp of wine, emptying the glass.

"Well, whatever *you're* doing, you didn't hear any of this from me," grunted Zaarin.

Grant simply nodded. He had a feeling even Zaarin would object to what he was about to do. Ethics aside, it was extremely risky.

But in the end, without risk there was no reward, and without reward he'd spend the rest of his career rotting in Farstine. If he could trade in his Vice Admiral's badge for something a little higher, well, that was worth getting Screed's dirt on his hands.

* * *

They stood in one line a dozen long, backs to the bulkhead, facing the firing squad. Most of them were dressed in the crumpled jumpsuits of N'zoth's manual labor crews and several had their white faces smudged with bruises.

The lieutenant who'd undertaken their arrest for sabotage had assured General Dodonna that the wounded Yevetha had been forcibly restrained after resisting arrest, but he didn't quite believe that. Some of the captive Yevetha still possessed the long dewclaws they'd been born with; one swipe of the long claws jutting out from their wrists could slice a man's throat easily. None of his military police had been killed affecting arrest, which implied that the Yevetha had been stunned, cuffed, and *then* beaten.

As laxes in discipline went, it was a fairly minor one. The military police had been eager to deal a little revenge with their fists. The prisoners had been caught in the B-pylon of Black Fifteen not ten minutes after their bomb burst an airlock and sucked two dozen human crewmen into the void. Dodonna had seen the recording of the terrorist cell's leader proudly admitting that his people had planted the bomb, and he had no reason to doubt the veracity of his statement. The Yevetha always seemed to take great pleasure in being martyred.

Still, Dodonna didn't like it. Striking prisoners in anger was unbecoming an officer, no matter how justified it might seem. He didn't like the violence the Yevetha were making his people stoop to. He wondered, not for the first time, if this damned planet and its miserable natives were really worth the effort of subjugation.

He stood on the catwalk overlooking the prisoners. They had their hands bound behind them and they faced the clone trooper firing squad without flinching.

Dodonna called down, "At ready!"

Twelve DC-17 blaster rifles snapped upward, barrels parallel to the deck. Dodonna squinted down at the terrorists' leader at the center of the line. His battered Yevethan face was twisted in a contemptuous scowl.

"Weapons aim!" Dodonna shouted.

The clone troopers shifted. One man adjusted the scope on his rifle.

"Fire!"

Twelve blasters fired at once, one shot each. Twelve Yevetha crumpled to the deck, pouring smoke from their narrow chests.

"At ease!" he shouted.

The clone troops dropped their rifles to their sides and stood as still as shut-down droids. He'd heard the Yevetha called clones that behind their backs. They considered them as identical and mindless as a mass of machines, without honor or dignity, which would have bothered Dodonna less if so many of his fellow Imperial officers didn't share similar views.

"Remove the bodies," he ordered, and the troops snapped into motion.

He didn't stay long enough to watch the clean-up. Commanding the executions had twisted his guts enough, even though this was the fifth time he'd done it in as many months. The bodies would be cremated and returned to the Yevetha in what was meant as a courtesy and probably taken as an insult, but he figured it would be even worse to simply space the bodies.

He couldn't bring himself to order such naked disrespect, though he knew if he did, many men would be happy to carry it out.

After commanding that grisly spectacle, Dodonna retreated to his private quarters. He was very much in need of a drink.

When he got there he was surprised to find a personal message from Ni-sihl-Nahm. The captain had docked *Starwind* for repair and resupply not an hour before and wanted to know if Dodonna was free for dinner. It was just the kind of distraction he'd been looking for.

The station's officers club was undamaged from the recent attacks, and they ate there. They sat at a private table close to the broad viewport overlooking the dense, luminous stars of the Koornacht Cluster. Even after six months there, the view still seemed exotic and strange. It was the only thing he might

conceivably miss about this place, assuming the Empire ever assigned him something better.

As they worked their way through a bottle of Raltiirian wine and medium-rare Corellian steak, the Cerean captain asked, "Have you heard about the attack on Ord Mirit?"

"No." He frowned. "I've been busy. When did it happen?"

"Earlier today. There's been no official news release, but words been getting through the fleet. I'm surprised you haven't heard."

"Like I said, I've been busy. What kind of attack?" He had a feeling he already knew who was responsible.

"They wasted the whole supply depot and destroyed a half-dozen ships in orbit, including unarmed carriers," Ni-sihl scowled. "They're really getting nasty."

"It's Syne and Slayke, isn't it?"

"Who else is hitting big targets in the Core?"

"I don't understand why nobody can stop them." Dodonna shook his head.

"Volunteering for the job, General?" Ni-sihl raised a bushy eyebrow.

"I have my post," Dodonna muttered and took a sip of wine.

"I know a lot of officers would be glad to see you put on the offensive. Myself included."

Dodonna sighed. "I don't want to be fighting wars again."

"I understand that, General, but everyone knows you *are* good at it."

"Don't remind me."

Dodonna had been slowly forcing himself to accept that the Judicial Forces he'd always wanted to serve weren't coming back. This new Empire seemed perpetually stuck on war footing, but was incapable of taking out a single hornet's nest no matter how much it stung.

"Have you talked with Admiral Screed about the problem?" Ni-sihl asked.

"I tried a little when he was here," Dodonna said. The Admiral had left for Anaxes one standard day earlier. "He insists the

situation is in hand and offered no further details. He tried to play it as need-to-know but I'm pretty sure he just *doesn't* know."

"I was guessing it would be something like that."

A glib remark like that might end a captain in trouble, but Dodonna and Ni-sihl-Nahm had known each other long enough to be honest. Dodonna asked, "Did Admiral Screed drop in on you while he was here? I recommended that he should."

"I haven't talked to Screed since before his promotion." Ni-sihl shook his head.

"Hmmm. A shame." Dodonna took another gulp of wine.

"Well, I'm sure he's very busy nowadays, what with the Home Fleet and all. Too busy for an old conehead like me."

"Stop that." Dodonna scowled. He hated hearing his officers refer to Cereans that way. Ni-sihl using the term, however sarcastically, felt even worse.

"It doesn't matter," Ni-sihl shrugged. "I'd rather tangle with some boneheaded human supremacists than Seps. Less live fire."

"You know I've had your back," Dodonna said. It sounded weak as he said it. "I've put you in for promotions again and again, but--"

"I'm not what the Empire is looking for in senior command nowadays." Ni-sihl smiled. It was very bitter.

Dodonna considered his words carefully. If it were anyone besides Ni-sihl he wouldn't say them at all. "Captain Nahm, have you considered an alternate line of work? One with more career advancement opportunities?"

"Like what? I signed on to be a Judicial but there's no Judicials now, no police, just the military."

"What about Cerea's local law enforcement?"

Ni-sihl sighed and finished off his wine glass. "I've thought about it. A little."

"You have your wives there. And your children. You just had a new one, didn't you? Ben-kihl?"

"Have you ever thought about going back to Commenor, joining the local police there?"

Dodonna couldn't keep his face straight. Ni-sihl gave a bitter chuckle and said, "We've seen to much of the universe, Jan. Both of us. Home... seems smaller to us now."

"I don't have a family to go back to. You do."

Ni-sihl reached for the wine bottle and poured himself a little more. "Are you *trying* to get me to resign, General?"

Dodonna didn't know if he was or not. "You're a fine officer. You deserve to serve an organization that puts your talents to use. Anything else is short-changing you, and the people you work for."

Ni-sihl sighed and took a gulp of wine. "Well, stop worrying about me, General. I'm stubborn, you know that. I'll stick around for a little while. And who knows, maybe things will change."

Dodonna took his own glass and drank. Any change in the Empire nowadays was going to have to come straight from the top; everyone below the Emperor was too frozen by fear and reverence to initiate major changes on their own. Palpatine still seemed like he was making changes, but none of his recent ones had been to Dodonna's liking. It seemed to him then that Jereveth Syne was the least of the Empire's problems.

* * *

Admiral Terrinald Screed's personal quarters on Anaxes took up an entire five-storey building and, by Octavian Grant's estimates, some thirty rooms, though he only got to see a portion of one storey as Screed's Twi'lek servant led him from the front entrance to the sitting room overlooking the kilometer-long field used for military promenades.

If these were Screed's quarters here, Grant could only imagine what his rumored penthouse on Imperial Center was like.

The Twi'lek servant, a pale-skinned teenager who gave his name simply as Boc, served Grant some fine tea and a plate of breads and cheeses, then excused himself and said the admiral would appear shortly. Grant wondered if Boc was merely a servant or a full-blown slave plucked from some ryll den on Ryloth.

Clearly the Twi'lek, or his master, had a different sense of time than Grant. The vice admiral remained in his seat, slowly sipping tea and nibbling his food, until he'd worked through half the plate and two-thirds of the tea. If he drank any more he'd have to find his way to a refresher, so he restrained himself and let his attention drift to the promenade below.

There was no one marching at this time, but he could vividly remember the times he had. He'd stood in lines of cadets when he entered the Judicial Academy and with lines of graduates when he got his first uniform. He'd felt so proud on both occasions, and more: he felt confident in achieving any goal, overcoming any obstacle.

The stupidity of youth. Still, as he looked down on the promenade he felt pangs of nostalgia. It had been a simpler time by far.

When Screed arrived he banished Grant's melancholy. The vice admiral stood and shook Screed's hand. He'd seen the man plenty of times in holos and several times from afar at official gatherings, but they'd never spoken one-on-one. He found himself slightly intimidated by Screed's scarred face and mechanical eye; his own gaze kept slipping away from it, down to the embossed obsidian-black walking stick the admiral leaned heavily on. He was glad when they both sat down; then he only had one thing to awkwardly avoid with his eyes instead of two.

"Thank you for coming all the way to Anaxes," Screed began. "It must have been a long trip."

"Thank you for seeing me, Admiral. I'm always glad to be back here," Grant smiled politely, though in truth Anaxes had a little too many memories lurking around.

"Well, if you've requested this audience, I'm sure you had something in mind."

"I do, Admiral. I'm sure you know what it is."

"I certainly have an idea."

"Sir, you know that I want to see Jereveth Syne and Zozridor Slayke defeated more than anyone in this Navy. I can't help you

from Farstine, but if I'm here, I can put all my knowledge and skills into defeating them."

Screed drummed three fingers on the arm of his chair. "As I understand it, Vice Admiral, your past encounters with Syne did not end well for you."

"I admit that, sir, but I would argue that in the case of Bavinyar, there were extenuating circumstances."

"I know about what happened on *Valediction*." Some-thing scraped in Screed's throat. "Mutiny is very ugly business."

"I'm glad you, at least, got the full story, sir. I argued to at least inform the other senior fleet commanders that a star destroyer had been captured by the enemy, but I was overruled. If word *had* been put out, it's possible the attack at N'zoth could have been stopped. I would also point out, sir, that I was the one to subdue Bavinyar initially. I killed Gregory Syne in combat, and I'm sure his daughter hasn't forgotten that."

Screed said nothing, just looked at him, as if asking 'is that all?'

"Also, sir, judging by reports from N'zoth and Ord Mirit, it seems your current strategy for countering Syne and Slayke has been lacking. Tell me, Admiral, has a task force been put together to hunt them down?"

Screed didn't bother to ask which reports Grant had been reading. He said, "A task force has not yet been put together."

Grant didn't bother to ask why not; it opened the door for excuses. He said, "Sir, I believe, very strongly, that a task force needs to be created for the express purpose of hunting down Jereveth Syne, wherever she may be in the galaxy."

"And you want to be in charge of it."

"All I wish is to serve in an advisory capacity." It was a lie. They both knew it, but he thought some show of humility was obligatory in this kind of negotiation. "I have more experience fighting Syne, good or bad, than any other officer in the fleet. I'm a resource, sir, and it seems a great shame to waste your resources against an enemy like Syne."

"I don't doubt your sincere desire to defeat her. I'm still not convinced you're the man for the job."

Grant could have asked if anyone else was being considered for the job, but he didn't want to know. He didn't want to end up pitting his own career against hypothetical Imperial luminaries like Adar Tallon or Hurst Romodi. His record was good, but not *that* good.

That left him to play the card he knew he'd have to play. He took a deep breath, steeled himself, and said, "There was actually one other matter I came here to discuss with you, Admiral. An unrelated one. Sir, have you ever heard of the Tarkus System?"

Screed's brows drew together. "Perhaps you should refresh my memory."

"There's no reason for you to know it, sir. It's an uninhabited system on the edge of the Ryndellian Sector."

"Then why are you bringing it up?" Screed sounded impatient.

"You see, sir, this system has no habitable planets, but it does have an asteroid belt. Until very recently, it was believed that there were no valuable minerals in this belt."

"And has that changed, Vice Admiral?"

"In fact it has, sir. We recently discovered an illegal mining operation managed by the Hutts. They've found sizable trallium deposits."

"I trust you've dealt with the miners."

Grant leaned forward. He held Screed's eyes, the real one and the mechanical. "At the moment, sir, the operation is in a state of... limbo."

"Meaning what?"

"Trallium is difficult to mine, and the deposits are scattered over hundreds of thousands of asteroids. The Hutts' employees have all of these deposits charted, as well as the infrastructure to extract it."

"Are you telling me you halted the operation without removing the miners?"

"Actually, sir, I convinced the miners to change employers. They have, effectively though unofficially, become government contractors. The extraction process continues as we speak."

"Who are these miners currently working for, Vice Admiral? Your government or you personally?"

"I don't have the authority to legally subsume the operation into the Empire. At the moment, the miners report to me, personally."

"And the profits from the operation?"

"I've been putting them into an account that can be easily merged with another, or change owners."

Screed shook his head. "And how long did you plan to keep soaking up money instead of sending it where it belongs?"

"Until everything could be processed through official channels, of course." Grant held his palms out. "If I'd intended to keep it forever I wouldn't be telling you now."

"Why are you telling *me* this instead of Tarkin?"

Grand Moff Tarkin didn't have an aura of corruption hanging over his head, of course, but Grant said, "I figured this would be more under your purview, sir. And to be perfectly honest, I wanted to make sure that money got there it belonged. Everyone knows that the financial situation in the outer sectors is... porous. Not that I'd accuse Grand Moff Tarkin of anything, of course. Some of these other moffs, well, I find they've risen fast on suspect credentials. I've never been comfortable with the current command structure. To be honest, I think placing sector fleets under the control of detached civilians has made our military less efficient and our sector governments more prone to corruption."

That was a common opinion among naval officers, especially ones who'd come up through the Judicial system. If Screed chose to take it at face value he easily could.

"Suppose I take over... managing your assets," Screed said. "I suppose you'd want something in return."

"I only want to do my duty to the Empire. Frankly, sir, I'd rather have this business with the trallium out of my hands." It was even true. He was uncomfortable playing privateer. He'd much rather earn his rank and privileges by settling matters with Syne, but he'd taken the opportunity that arose.

"Your selflessness is quite admirable," Screed said. The sarcasm in his voice stung.

"Sir, I came to you because I trusted you to do the right thing for our interests, and the interests of the Empire."

Screed's eyes were probing, judging. "Vice Admiral, how long are you scheduled to be on Anaxes?"

"Two more days, sir."

"I'll consider what you've said and talk to you again before then."

Grant felt a little tension go out. He hadn't expected things to be settled in one conversation. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a data-card, and set it on the table between them.

"What is this?" Screed frowned.

"Preliminary financial data on the operations in the Tarkus System. For your consideration."

Screed didn't pick it up. "Thank you, Vice Admiral. I'll be sure to give it a thorough review."

"I'm glad."

Screed snapped his fingers loudly, and his Twi'lek servant appeared out of nowhere. The pale, gangly youth bowed and said in his high-pitched voice, "What is your bidding, Master?"

"Please escort Vice Admiral Grant out, Boc."

"As you command," the Twi'lek grinned, bearing jagged, pointy teeth. Grant tried not to wince.

Boc led him through the same winding halls, past the same luxurious rooms. As they reached the door Grant asked, "How many servants does Admiral Screed have, if I may ask?"

"Servants?" Boc blinked red eyes, then grinned again. "Oh, the admiral had quite a few *servants*. Here and... elsewhere. But I'm his favorite, you know. I always know exactly what he wants."

"I'm sure." Grant tried to hide his distaste. "Thank your master for the tea and food."

"Of course." Boc bowed deeply. Grant couldn't help but feel the creature was mocking him. "I looked forward to seeing you again... Vice Admiral."

Grant kept the scowl off his face until he left the building and started across the broad green lawn toward his waiting speeder. The meeting itself had gone as well as he could have expected, but he couldn't feel confident. If anything, he felt helpless. All he could do now was wait for other men to decide his fate.

12

"In the end, the leaders of the Whiplash group weren't beings we knew well. We had the same goals, and we helped each other along, but for the most part our lives were discreet. Given the work we did, that discretion was necessary, but sometimes it feels like we were cheated out of knowing some truly special beings."

Pol Haus had a lot of different contacts in Imperial City from all different walks of life, but not many of them would have been privy to the location of a secret Inquisitorius base.

Still, Jax Pavan had asked. Whiplash had saved a lot of people from the Empire over the past two years, but multiple Jedi Masters would be a particular feather in their metaphorical cap.

That was what Pol Haus tried to tell himself, at least, as he waited on Monument Plaza for his contact to show. It was just after noon and that pre-dawn wakeup was finally starting to take its toll, but he kept pacing around the statue of a Chancellor Rydan, just as he'd told Keela he would when he'd asked the Toydarian to set him up with one of her Black Sun contacts.

Monument Plaza had undergone a major re-fit since the change in government. The broad space, a favorite of tourists and locals alike, had once been filled with statues of various Republic luminaries, but most of those had been removed and replaced with

newly-minted heroes of the New Order, most of them martyred soldiers from the Clone Wars.

The centerpiece, of course, was the hundred-meter-high statue of Emperor Palpatine, dressed in those new ceremonial robes he liked, both arms lifted up toward the sky. His head was tilted back but you could make out the sagging and scars on the huge face. Palpatine didn't want people to forget the supposed Jedi coup attempt that had left him horribly scarred. Chancellor Palpatine had been elegant-looking, for an older human; as Emperor he looked like a shrivelled monster out of somebody's night-mares, and he seemed to bear that deformity as a badge of honor.

Aside from being an eyesore, the Palpatine statue was heavily guarded at the base, which was why Haus was circling the statue of Rydan on the far edge of the plaza. It was one of the shortest statues still standing and one of the only ones left honoring a Republic politician. The Chagrian had been Chancellor almost two centuries earlier and Haus had no idea why his image was still permissible. Maybe Palpatine was throwing a bone to his Chagrian supporter, Mas Amedda, or maybe Rydan had had an autocratic streak.

Whatever the reason, history didn't matter right now. All that mattered was the man Haus was set to meet. Everyone knew Black Sun had the best intel network short of the Empire itself, and there was a good chance they'd helped the Empire secretly move material into the Deep Core themselves. Palpatine and the criminal underworld seemed joined at the hip.

Meeting with Black Sun agents were rare, even for Hause. When he first showed up at the Plaza he'd naturally been on edge. He'd also been up early, and when the thrill wore off he started to get tired. After who-knew-how-many loops around the statue, he stopped to lean his rear against the guard rail. He crossed his arms over his chest and risked closing his eyes. He breathed slowly, steadily. His head tilted forward. The chatter of so many tourists and passing pedestrians seemed to meld into one bland blur of sound.

Then someone said, "Is it just me, or is one of his horns cracked?"

Haus' eyes snapped open. His body jerked upright. In front of him was a red-furred Devaronian girl, barely an adolescent by her species' standards.

"What do you think?" she asked. She had a sly grin on her face. "The right horn looks broken to me."

As he'd been instructed to do by Keela, Haus tilted his head back, shaded his eyes from the noonday sun with one hand, and peered up at the statue. Neither of the Chagrian's stone horns were damaged at all, but he said, "I think you're wrong. I think it's the left one."

The Devaronian girl wagged her head and grinned. "I think your eyesight's bad, old man."

"That's a distinct possibility," Haus said. "But I'm pretty sure *neither* of them are really cracked."

"Of course not. I was just testing you."

"You're not what I expected."

The girl gave a what-can-I-say shrug. "If you want to talk, let's talk."

"We stand out."

"We'll make it quick. Besides, nobody's paying attention to us anyway. What do you want?"

"Information."

The girl rolled her eyes. "What *kind* of information?"

"I need to know about Imperial activity in the Deep Core. Specifically, the Inquisitorius."

"You're asking a lot."

"The Inquisitorius has a base somewhere past the Empress Teta System. I need to know where, plus any other information I can get about it." This girl was clearly a messenger, not a full-blown agent, but there was still a chance of getting what he needed by tonight.

"What are you offering in return?"

"One of your storehouses got raided recently. A Vigo lost his love slave and, more importantly, his entire store of spice. I can give you the people responsible."

The girl raised an eyebrow, thoughtful, but said nothing. She was acting more mature, and more devious, than a girl her age had any right to.

"If your Vigo wants to clear his name with his higher-ups, he's going to have to through me."

"Kral Kolvus has already been... *dealt with*," the girl said. Something about her innocent face and dangerous tone made Haus shudder.

"His replacement, then. I'm sure your people want retribution. I can give it to you. I know the names of the main perpetrator and all his associates."

The girl looked thoughtful again. Haus was effectively ending Jax Pavan's career on Coruscant, and for that matter a lot of other planets; Black Sun had a very long reach. Still, Pavan had Whiplash to protect him and, hopefully, would get a bunch of Jedi Master friends soon. It was a fair enough trade.

"Can you tell us where to find them?" she asked.

"I'll give you his last known location." The girl looked reluctant. He pressed, "I have my own sources, very good ones. I'm a very well-connected person."

The girl rolled her eyes. "I know who you are, Prefect Haus."

He bit back a curse. He'd told Keela to set up an anonymous meeting. Black Sun had probably slipped the Toydarian a few extra credits for his name. He just prayed Keela hadn't told them anything more than that.

He tried to play it confident. "Then you know I can get you what you want, if you get me what *I* want."

"I'll look into it," the girl said simply.

"When can I get an answer? I'm on a tight schedule."

"I think we can get you one tonight."

"Good. When and where?"

The girl looked around Monument Plaza, as though considering another statue for the next meet-up, but in the end she said, "Let's meet at the Colonnades."

That was another busy district, full of tourists taking in the newly-remodeled step fountains as well as locals enjoying the various restaurants on either side of the long central promenade.

"Okay," he said, "Which fountain?"

"How about the one furthest east, with the blue lights? Show up at 2200 hours."

"Done. Should I expect you or someone else?"

The Devaronian girl gave him a sly grin, and he started to wonder whether this child was a full-blown Black Sun operative after all.

Without responding, she turned around and sauntered off through the crowd. Haus sunk back against the guard rail, sighed, and wondered if he should go back to his flat and grab a few hours' sleep. His gut told him it was going to be a busy night.

* * *

No one knew how many chambers Imperial Palace had except for Darth Sidious himself. There were at least two dozen different rooms used for exercise and sparring by Inquisitors, clone soldiers, stormtrooper recruits, ISB agents, palace security, and the Emperor's personal Crim-son Guard.

There was only one used by Darth Vader himself. He had spent many sessions in the circular chamber, combating captured Separatist battle droids and mech-anical beasts of Imperial creation. It had taken him a long time to get used to the heavy half-machine body the Emperor had built around the corpse of Anakin Skywalker, but gradually he'd become confident in his own abilities.

He'd never allowed anyone else to use the chamber until now. He stood to one side, watching the small, lithe, nimble Arkanian girl drop to her knees, roll between the legs of two TaggeCo Z-83 battle droids, and snap back up in time to deflect their blasts with her lightsaber. One red laser whipped back and left a smoking hole in the chamber wall; the other bounced right into the armored face of the droid that had fired it.

The droid barely budged and kept firing.

Hanna Ding somersaulted back, evading the next round of lasers. She regained her footing, squared herself to face both droids, and began to slowly advance on them, batting back lasers all the while.

Vader could feel the girl blazing in the Force: the concentration, the craving to win the match, the even greater need to prove herself, both to herself and to Vader. The girl was frightened and desperate, but she lacked the anger that led so many beings to the Dark Side. Her race was famous for both its reason and its ego; he wondered whether she would even transcend those traits and become something unique.

Even if she didn't, Vader could use her. Still, he hoped to breed an apprentice as capable and loyal as Kuthara and Drayneen were for Jerec.

When she was almost within saber's reach of the droids, they began sidestepping away from each other in order to attack Ding from either flank. The Arkanian quickly jumped into the air toward one droid. It tried to track her but its range of motion was limited. Ding dropped down on the droid from directly above and stabbed her saber-blade directly through its mechanical head. She crouched there for one long second, boots on its shoulders, fish-tailing the blade inside the droid's guts. Then the second one opened fire.

Ding tumbled off the dead droid's shoulders and fell behind it. That might have been what saved her. The dead droid wavered on its feet for several seconds while the live one pounded its torso with laser blasts. When the first droid finally fell back, crashing hard against the hard floor, Ding leaped to the air again. Vader could see the smoke twirling off her robe, could feel the pain of scorch marks where laser-blasts had cut through her robe and skimmed her shoulder and thigh.

For a second he experienced her determination, as clear as his own, as she slammed horizontally into the droid, boots first, and plunged her lightsaber into its chest with both hands.

The force of impact alone wouldn't have been enough to topple the droid, but the thrust of her saber must have several integral components inside. The droid toppled onto its back, taking Ding

with it. Just as before, she swung her blade back and forth inside its torso, then pulled out and cut off the droid's head and arms with three swift strikes. She even did it without scarring the floor beneath.

It was over. Ding panted and knocked a wave of pale hair out of face. The sweat on her forehead and neck glistened in the overhead lights.

She looked at him across the chamber and said, "It is done, Lord Vader."

He lurched forward. His lightsaber sprung to life in his hands. Ding was shocked and confused, but he was far enough away that she was able to ignite her own saber before he reached her.

He swung hard, again and again, knocking her back a step every time. The girl panted and groaned as she struggled to block every attack. She didn't even attempt to strike back at Vader. He could feel fear radiating off of her: not fear of failure or disgrace but the primal fear of death.

He hit her again and again until her shoulders hit the wall and she bounced a step forward in surprise. Only then did he pull his sword far back enough to give the girl an opening.

She took it. She thrust her saber horizontally forward, right at his chest-plate.

It took just a flick of the wrist to deflect her attack and send her lightsaber spinning out of her hand, then a touch of the Force to throw her back and pin her against the wall.

The girl still struggled, still raged at him. She had the presence of mind to reach out with the Force to grab her fallen lightsaber, and enough natural skill to actually pull it toward her.

Vader overpowered her easily. The lightsaber flew into his free hand. Still the girl struggled, angry and determined, to grab it from him.

"Enough," he said, and let her fall hard onto the floor.

The pain seemed to knock her out of her state of rage. She stared up at Darth Vader, no longer angry but no longer afraid either. She seemed proud and defiant, and that gave Vader more hope for her than anything he'd seen thus far.

"Your performance today was... acceptable." He shut off his lightsaber and hooked it on his belt; he kept Ding's in his left hand.

The girl knew better than to ask questions. She lurched forward onto one knee and bowed her head, but her sense of pride did not diminish.

"Lord Vader," she said, "May I give my report *now*?"

He'd forced her to fight the combat droids before telling him the results of her assignment at the ISB office that morning. She'd come back so swelled with that typical Arkanian pride that he'd decided to humble her first.

She wasn't humbled now, but she had *earned* her pride, which was the best outcome of all.

"Speak," he said.

Without lifting her head, she said, "My Lord, I went to the ISB office to review their material regarding the Whiplash organization."

"And what did you find?"

"Many things. my Lord. I'm sure you already know most of them, but one new artifact may be useful."

To the point, good. "What did you find?"

"Until recently, the ISB had a paid informer within the police department in the Zi-Kree Sector."

"Go on," he said. Zi-Kree Sector had always been a hotbed of criminal activity, and, unsurprisingly, dissident activity as well.

"The informant was a Bothan named Kalibar Droosh. He was a direct subordinate of the department's prefect. In his last report, Droosh said he suspected his superior of involvement with Whiplash. The prefect's name is Pol Haus."

"I know the man," Vader said.

On the outside the prefect was disheveled and aloof, but only on the outside. Vader distrusted him for that reason alone, but he'd never had cause to suspect Haus of active treason.

"My Lord, shortly after this report, Droosh disappeared in the lower levels. He was reported killed in an accident by Prefect Haus, but there were no other witnesses to the event."

"Most interesting. What has the ISB done with this information?"

"They've increased surveillance on Haus, my Lord, but as yet they haven't inserted another operative into his department."

"Are you suggesting more aggressive methods of investigation are necessary?"

"I believe it's the best lead we have to finding Whiplash, and Jax Pavan."

"Is that the *only* lead you have found?"

He sensed the fear again, the doubt. "I think it is the best, my Lord. ISB hasn't heard anything concrete about Whiplash since the, ah, incident in the Bothan System a month ago."

"Stand, Miss Ding."

She rose steadily, and when she picked up her head she didn't flinch from his mirror-black gaze.

She might make a worthy apprentice yet, but she needed to be tested more. Thankfully, he had a healthy supply of battle droids waiting to spar.

Before he could say anything, he heard the vibration of the chamber's alarm bell. Without saying a word, he turned on Ding, stalked over to the door, and opened it.

Nera Masiq was standing there when it opened. Unlike Ding, she shrunk a little from his presence, though she tried to hide it.

"Why have you interrupted me?" he asked.

"My Lord," Masiq said, "A visitor has arrived. He wishes to speak with you."

"A *visitor*? What visitor is that?"

"I, ah, was not given his name, sir. I only know that he was sent to your personal waiting room on the Emperor's orders."

He'd felt nothing through the Force. That could have meant the visitor was lying, or that Darth Sidious was playing yet another of his petty power games.

"How did you know the Emperor sent him?"

"He came escorted by the Crimson Guard, sir."

So it was a game then. "I will see him momentarily. Dismissed."

"Yes, my Lord."

Masiq was in the middle of a bow when Vader turned away and the door whipped shut behind him. Across the chamber, Hanna Ding stood where he'd left her. She was still flushed and breathing hard, but her body was straight and she didn't flinch from his attention.

"You may clean yourself and rest, Inquisitor Ding," he said. "But be ready for action when I call you next."

"Thank you, Lord Vader."

She didn't bow. He liked that. When he went back to the door and stepped out into the hallway, Masiq was gone, and that pleased him too.

Then Darth Vader marched for his waiting room, knowing that whoever he found there wouldn't please him at all.

When he arrived, however, he was neither pleased nor displeased. He was simply surprised by the being standing before him.

The Falleen stood almost as tall as Vader himself, and elegant violent-and-gold robes spilled down from his broad green shoulders. He wore his black hair pulled back in a topknot over an otherwise bald head. His smile was wide but his eyes were dark and probing.

Without bowing, the man said, "Greetings, Lord Vader. It is an honor to meet you face-to-face. You may call me Xizor."

Vader remembered the name immediately. He was at once curious and insulted that the Emperor would send a common mobster to his personal chambers.

"I have heard of you," he told the Falleen. "Why do you wish to see me?"

"I had actually come to deliver my news to the Emperor himself. It was he who sent me to you. Not that I object, of course. I've heard much about you."

"Why?" he repeated.

Xizor's smile didn't falter. "As you may know, Lord Vader, my organization suffered a small setback recently."

"Your drug supplies were liquidated and your Vigo humiliated," Vader said plainly.

"Humiliated, and replaced by someone far more competent."

That explained the smile. "I have heard that the incident at your storehouse was perpetrated by a Jedi. Have you come to confirm that?"

"Not exactly," Xizor allowed. "However, I think what I have is even better."

"Then say what you've come to say."

Xizor laughed politely, as though Vader's impatience was some genteel joke. "Today someone reached out to my organization promising to give me the identity and location of the people responsible for the incident. In exchange, he wanted the location of the secret Inquisi-torius base in the Deep Core."

"And why did he ask *you* for that information?"

Xizor shrugged easily. "It is well known that my organization knows many things. As to *why* he wanted it, well, I can't say."

"And do you have the name of this would-be informant?"

"Well, that is the interesting part," Xizor said. "It was, in fact, a Zabrak by the name of Pol Haus."

"I am... familiar the police prefect."

"Then perhaps you also knew that he paid one of my associates a good deal of money to make an old maglev train disappear. Or perhaps not. I understand that was a more recent development. About a month ago, I think. Around the same time Whiplash activity in Imperial City seemed to cease."

Pieces fell into place quickly. ISB had suspected Whiplash of using a maglev train as a mobile head-quarters. Haus must have killed his lieutenant Droosh and disposed of the maglev train after the failed attempt on the Emperor's life. If Pol Haus was leading Whiplash now, why would he volunteer to give up Jax Pavan? To gain something greater. Vader had already come to suspect that Pavan was no longer on Coruscant; this confirmed it. Why did he want to know the location of the Inquisitorius base? Whiplash itself didn't have the capacity to destroy it. However, if Jax Pavan somehow learned that captive Masters were being taken to the planet, or even suspected, he would do everything in his power to save his fellow Jedi.

"For what it's worth," Xizor said, "I already have a strong suspicion as to who raided our storehouse."

"Do you?" asked Vader, genuinely curious.

"I have crossed paths with a certain Jedi several times. His name is Jax Pavan."

Vader tried to cover his surprise by asking, "Why did you not inform the Empire of this?"

"I thought it would be useful to have a Jedi in my pocket. Unfortunately, things didn't work out," Xizor said casually.

Vader was shocked by such a brazen admission. It would earn most beings a death sentence. The fact that Xizor could say as much here, in the heart of Imperial Palace, before the Emperor's personal executor, meant that he was either very arrogant or he already had the Emperor's favor.

It was probably both. Between Jerec and Xizor, Vader was getting sick of rivals.

"Do you believe this Pol Haus has a connection to Jax Pavan?" Vader asked.

"I can't say, but frankly the whole situation smelled strange to me. Therefore, I decided to bring it to the Emperor's attention."

"I'm sure the *Emperor* is most grateful."

"Mind you, we haven't told Pol Haus anything yet."

Xizor was never going to confirm or deny that he knew about Prakith, and there was no point in trying to force him to.

Darth Vader asked, "When will you meet Haus again?"

"I didn't meet him personally, but he's scheduled to see one of my agents at 2200 tonight, at the Colonnades. He'll be at the fountain on the eastern end of the promenade, with the blue lights. I assume you'll want to talk to him yourself."

Vader regarded the Falleen carefully, taking in his sleek robes, his polite smile, his dark eyes. If he didn't know better, he'd take Xizor for a very ruthless and egotistical businessman. In a sense, he was exactly that.

"Why did you throw away your chance at revenge on Pavan?"

"To be frank, I doubt he's on Coruscant any more," Xizor gave a little sigh. "So instead, I trust you to deliver my revenge for me."

"Your trust is most welcome," Vader lied. He would be watching Xizor now, and Xizor would be watching him, and they both knew it.

"Consider this a show of my loyalty," Xizor said. "I hope the Emperor appreciates it."

"I will see that he does."

"Then that's all I ask." Xizor glanced toward the doors but didn't move. "Is there anything else you wish to speak about, Lord Vader, or is our business done?"

"It is complete."

"Ah. I'm glad to hear that. I will show myself out."

Xizor glided across the carpet and stepped through the doors. Vader watched them close behind him, then tried to put the Vigo out of his mind. Xizor might be a problem in the future, but his current one was High Inquisitor Jerrec. Without knowing it, one rival might have handed him the advantage over the other.

Everything depended on what happened when night fell. He hoped Hanna Ding would prove worthy of the responsibility he was about to give her.

* * *

After the meeting at Monument Plaza, Pol Haus went back to his flat, checked the comm system, then treated himself to a meager three hours of sleep. Then he got back up and went to a restaurant where he downed three straight cafs as the sun set and waited for Sheel Mafeen to show.

The meeting had been his idea. He didn't know what was going to happen tonight and he wanted to fill her in on what he *did* know about Syne, Slayke, Yimmon, Pavan, and everything else before he went.

Well, *almost* everything. He wasn't going to tell her about the potential alliance with Bel Iblis yet. He hadn't told anyone and he hadn't met with any of the senator's people either. He wanted to make sure the *other* new alliance worked out before then.

"Are you sure you want to be wired for your meeting, Pol?" Sheel asked as she started on a soft drink.

"I need to be alert. And three cafs isn't a lot. It's not like I'm taking stims."

"You don't trust Black Sun."

If he did, he wouldn't have packed two guns: one BlasTech service pistol at his hip, one small Czerka hold-out strapped to his forearm. "Would you?"

"You realize that, even if this does go through, Pavan and his people can't ever come back to Coruscant."

"I know, but it'll be worth it." Having Jax Pavan off-planet would save him a lot of stress too, though he didn't tell Sheel that.

"Have you told him about this yet?"

"I haven't talked to him since this morning."

"Well," she sighed, "Even if this *doesn't* come through, at least the meeting at Sarillion's been set up. Do you know if Yimmon is going himself?"

"That's the point, isn't it? I just wonder whether Syne and Slayke are going to bring their whole fleets or not."

"That's for them to know and us to find out. Eventually."

Sheel rarely acted like someone involved in ultra-risky seditious activity against the government. It was one of things he liked about her. Being around her calmed his own natural edginess and paranoia.

Tonight, though, he was going to have to depend on those qualities, so he said, "I can't stay much longer. I want to show up at the Colonnades early and check the place out."

"Okay." Sheel put down her drink. "I'll come with you."

"Out of the question. This is too risky."

"Which is why you might need a backup."

When he heard *backup* he thought of his armed police deputies. Sheel Mafeen was no fighter and they both knew it.

"You might need an extra set of eyes," she clarified. "I can sit myself in one of the restaurants that look down on the promenade. I'll blend in with everybody else. We can keep an open comm link and I'll warn you if I see any-thing suspicious."

An extra set of eyes would be useful, but he didn't like the idea of dragging her into danger.

"Pol, let me help you on this, please." She reached across the table and put a hand over his. "You take too much on yourself sometimes."

He felt a spike of guilt for keeping Bel Iblis a secret. "You have to make sure to stay *far* away. And you have to hide the fact that you're watching me."

"Pol, the Colonnades will be full of people. I'll blend in fine."

"All right," he sighed. "But if anything looks bad, don't try to help me. Get out. Get out fast and call Pavan and Yimmon."

Sheel had the access codes to his flat and the Whiplash comm system, though she'd never used them. She was the only one he'd trusted them with.

"You can count on it," she said. A little seriousness slipped into her voice, finally.

There was little more to say. Haus finished his last caf, and together they exited the cafe. They took a moment to make sure their comlinks were set to the same frequency, then took separate speeder-cabs to the Colonnades. He did his trip in two legs with two different cabs, just to be safe.

The Colonnades ran for a full kilometer, east to west. The main promenade was marked by a variety of elaborate step fountains, each one lit with a different color. The biggest ones were in the center and drew the most tourists, but at 2200 hours there were plenty of people moving around the blue-lit fountain at the eastern edge.

Haus was all right with that. He didn't want to meet a Black Sun agent in private, where anything might happen. He had the cab drop him off at the west end of the promenade and he walked slowly, casually, to the opposite side, pretending to look at the fountains but actually looking at the people. At night it was harder to get a fast read on beings unless they get close close. After he passed the largest fountain in the middle, he flicked on the comlink attached to his jacket lapel and said quietly, "Are you there?"

A second later, Sheel's voice buzzed in his ear. "Enjoying a lovely dinner-for-one at the Rodian restaurant on level two. I don't see you."

"I got off on the west side. I'll be at the rendezvous point shortly."

"Understood. I'll keep my eyes open."

When Haus reached the blue fountains he walked in a loose circle around its perimeter. After the Devaronian girl that afternoon, he had no idea what kind of agent Black Sun would send this time. His gut told him it would be someone different.

He made three loops around the fountain and allowed himself a few glances up at the Rodian restaurant. There were a dozen tables strung along the place's balcony and in the poor light he couldn't tell which one had Sheel.

At around 2215, he sat down on a bench facing both the fountain and the restaurant. Black Sun agents showed up when they wanted to, not when they said they would, but if it reached 2230 and no one showed, he was going to walk away. He was about to tell Sheel that when someone sat down beside him.

It was another adolescent humanoid girl. This one seemed on the older end of it. She had long yellow hair, pale skin, and pale eyes. Arkanian, then.

"Should you be with someone, young lady?" he asked her.

"I'm with you, aren't I?"

"I'm way too old for you."

"That's okay. What I'm here for will only take a minute."

He raised an eyebrow "Do you know who I am?"

"Prefect Pol Haus," she said without smiling. She wasn't putting on a coy act like the other girl and he preferred it that way.

"Well, I can guess who sent you, then."

Her mouth slanted in what was almost a wry smile; it quickly disappeared. "I have what you want. Do you have what I want?"

"I can give you the names and last location of the people involved in the storehouse raid."

"Their leader. Name him."

Down the business, this one. He took a breath and said, "A Jedi named Jax Pavan."

The Arkanian girl leaned closer. "And how do *you* know Jax Pavan?"

For a second he wanted to tell her everything; he didn't know why. Instead he said, "I'm a cop. I know a lot of things."

"Including how to contact Black Sun."

"Like I said, I know a lot of things. Can you give me what *I* want?"

"Yes, but I was instructed to learn more from you first. Who else helped Jax Pavan?"

He wasn't prepared to give everything away, not without getting something in return, but somehow his lips moved and his voice said, "Den Dhur, a Sullustan. And a Zabrak from Dathomir."

"Her name?" the girl leaned closer still.

He tore his eyes away from hers and looked in the direction of the Rodian cafe. Sheel was hearing this. She had to be wondering what had gotten into him.

"I need to know where the Inquisitorius base is," he said firmly, but part of him still *wanted* to tell her the rest.

Something was wrong. Something was messing with his mind. It was almost as if that girl was a-

"Pol!" Sheel's voice crackled in his ear, "Two squads of troopers, black armor! They're heading your way!"

He jumped to his feet and told her, "Get out! Now!"

The Arkanian girl jumped up too. Her hand went inside her jacket; so did his. Haus drew a half-second faster.

He fired his BlasTech from the hip: not good for aiming but at this range it was hard to miss. He winged the Arkanian girl just as she was bringing her weapon out. She dropped it and he watched a metal cylinder skitter across the flagstones.

He started running. Dozens of small side-streets and alleys led into the promenade and he sprinted for the closest one. He heard shouts of people as he passed, and beneath that the clattering of boots.

"Sheel where are you?" he called as he turned down a side alley and scampered down a narrow stairwell.

"Pol, they're coming for me!"

"*Sheel!* You have to *run!* Grab a speeder, anything, get out!"

"Pol, I-"

He heard the sharp tang of blasterfire, Sheel's shortened cry, the clatter of his comlink hitting pavement.

He stumbled and almost fell to the bottom of the stairs. They shot Sheel. She could be *dead*.

No, it was worse than that. The Imps would want them both alive.

He panted, swore, keeled over with a hand on the railing, suddenly aware of how breathless he was. If he'd stayed in better shape he might have-

No. There was no way he could have helped Sheel. He couldn't help her now either. The Imps would torture her, use their Inquisitors to pry into her brain, learn everything about Jax Pavan, about Sarillion, about his comm system.

Everything except Garm Bel Iblis.

He swore again and hit the wall with his fist. He had to escape. He had to get back to his flat and warn Yimmon and Pavan, assuming the Imps hadn't raided that place already. But no, his security system was still in place, he'd have gotten a message if it went off. Yes, he had to get to his flat and warn them. If he didn't, everything was lost. *Everything*.

He heard voices behind him, clattering feet. He some-how found the breath to start running around. He ran down the alley, around the corner, down the new lane, all the way to the end. He half-fell against the railing of the catwalk that ran along the side of a row of buildings. Beyond the catwalk was a long, long fall into the dark.

Black-clad troopers appeared at the far end of the alley behind him. He raised his gun and fired two shots, then ran down the catwalk. He knew he wouldn't get far before the clones got onto the catwalk too, but he couldn't spot any new alley to turn down.

Then a body fell from the sky and slammed down on the catwalk in front of him. He saw the white-gold hair, the pale skin. Then he saw the red burst of her lightsaber coming to life. He raised his BlasTech, hoping for one impossible shot, but the Arkanian girl whipped her blade out and severed his gun-barrel.

He heard boots clatter on the catwalk behind him. He didn't even bother to look back. He let the smoking ruin of his gun fall from his hand.

"Surrender," the girl said, and held out her lightsaber.

They would get everything he knew already from Sheel. Everything except Bel Iblis.

That alone was worth protecting.

For a second, he wished he could come up with some clever farewell line, some parting volley for this damned Inquisitor girl who'd ruined everything he'd ever worked and fought for, but he wasn't that witty.

He simply hurled himself over the catwalk railing and into the void.

He fell. Wind stung his face, furred his hair, ballooned his longcoat. Every Coruscanti wondered, at some point in their lives, what it would be like to fall into the endless chasms between skyscrapers. They said you passed out before you hit the ground.

He was going to find out for sure. If he could have drawn breath, he'd have laughed.

And then he stopped.

He hung there in the void, arms spread wide, limp coat-tails dangling downward toward the black. And then, steadily, his entire body rotated to face the rising skyscrapers, the brilliant lights, the catwalk from which the gold-haired Arkanian girl leaned, one hand out-stretched.

She started reeling him in slowly. As she pulled him closer he saw the black-armored clone troopers ready their rifles. They were going to stun him as he hung there in midair, then haul him off to their secret torture chamber and pry out every last secret before they killed him.

He shook his right arm and let the little Czerka hold-out pistol fall into his palm. He was still far enough away that the girl and her soldiers probably didn't recognize it.

He took a deep breath. The Czerka only had one setting, *kill*. It was all he needed.

He'd have rather found out what was at the bottom of those chasms, but at least he could spite the Imps this way.

There wasn't time to hesitate. Necessity overtook fear. Pol Haus pressed the Czerka's cold, hard tip against his temple. He saw shock dawn on the girl's face right before he squeezed the trigger.

13

"Before we met Hett and Scout, Jax had pretty much convinced himself he was the last Jedi left in the galaxy. He'd adjusted to that thought; that was why he was trying to train Sacha and Magash. When a bunch more Jedi stumbled into our lives out of nowhere, he adjusted with ease. I think it helped that neither Scout nor Hett were looking for a leadership position."

They were floating in space on the edge of the Metellos system, both ships coupled together. They didn't know where to go and didn't know how long they'd have to wait until they did, which meant they had to do something to fill the anxious empty hours.

Jax Pavan decided to try teaching.

Everyone was gathered in *Laranth's* main hold. Jax sat crossed-legged on a crate again. Magash, Sacha, and Scout sat on the deck in the cleared-out middle of the room. Den and I-Five leaned against one bulkhead, watching the show with curiosity. A'Sharad Hett leaned silently against the opposite one, exuding impatience through the Force.

Jax tried to dampen that emotion. He needed his three students, if he could call them that, to concentrate.

"Okay," he said, "Magash, I want you to hold an image in your mind. Can you do that?"

"I can." The Zabrak woman sat in a Dathomiri mediation pose with her legs crossed and eyes closed, her back stiff and hands resting palms-up atop her knees.

"Think about that one thing and nothing else? Can you do that?"

"I am."

"Okay. Sacha, can you tell me what Magash is picturing?"

The tall human woman was trying to mimic Magash's pose, but somehow it looked unnatural on her. While Magash's face was calm, Sacha's was scrunched up in concentration.

"I think I see... a creature. An animal," she said.

"What kind of animal?"

"No neck... long arms... What do you call them? A rancor. I see a rancor."

"Is she right, Magash?"

"She is," the Zabrak said without opening her eyes.

Sacha's popped open. She exhaled and said, "Okay, wow. I didn't think I could do that. It just sort of *came* to me."

"Very good," Jax smiled slightly. "Now, I want you to picture something yourself. Really concentrate on it. Scout, I want you to read Sacha's mind."

"I'll try," the girl said. She was sitting on the hard deck with her legs tucked beneath her and her folded hands in her lap, the standard Jedi meditation pose, without showing discomfort.

"Okay," Sacha said as she closed her eyes. "I'm thinking of something."

"Think *only* of it," Jax reminded her.

"I am."

"Scout?"

The girl closed her eyes and took on a thoughtful expression. Her lips parted slightly but she didn't speak. She'd kept on claiming that her Force powers were weak, that she'd barely avoided being washed out to the AgriCorps, but he didn't believe that. If she'd escaped an Imperial attack and made it all the way from Lucazec to Metellos, Scout was more gifted than she realized.

"A hydro-spanner," she said at last.

Sacha opened her eyes and smiled. "Nice one."

"Okay," Jax said, "Let's try something else. I want you to think of a *word*. A single one. Scout, do you have something?"

The girl hadn't even opened her eyes. "Yes," she said.

"Okay. Magash, I want you to try and read it."

Magash was still in her meditation pose too. The Zabrak woman was perfectly still for almost thirty seconds before she said, "Candle."

Scout smiled. "Got it in one."

"Excellent. Magash, try to send something Sacha's way."

Still frozen in place, Magash said, "Ready."

Sacha closed her eyes and concentrated. Jax watched her carefully; his fingers twitched as she held her knees and her breathing was too deep. She was pressing herself too hard.

After a long, awkward minute, Sacha said, "Lightning?"

Magash opened her eyes and shook her head. "River."

"Not even close," Sacha sighed. "I knew I wouldn't get that. I'm good with spatial stuff. Always have been. But words... Not my thing."

Behind Jax, Den said, "Captain, why did we take on an illiterate pilot?"

"I'm not illiterate!" Sacha said. "I've just never had skills, Force skills, that go that way."

"It's all right," Jax assured her. "We just need to find your natural strengths and improve on them."

"Well, they'd better improve fast," Sacha flexed her shoulders. "When we find out where that base is we won't have time to mess around."

"At Bavinyar, Kina Ha was able to bridge minds like nothing I've ever felt," Scout said. "All the Jedi there, it was like we were thinking and feeling as one."

"Do you mean she strengthened your natural connection?" Magash asked.

"*Strengthen* is putting it mildly." Scout looked to Hett. "You felt it too, didn't you?"

"I felt... her touch," the taciturn Jedi Master said. "I didn't let myself get pulled all the way. I couldn't."

"Oh. That's right. You were still fighting on *Vale-diction*."

Magash shifted her attention to Den and I-Five. "Does anyone else wish to try?"

"Me?" I-Five tilted his head. "Really?"

"I've gotta admit, I'm kind of curious," Sacha muttered.

Jax looked at Hett. "You're the Master, which means you're the strongest one here. Do you want to try?"

Hett seemed to consider for a moment, then shook his head. "You know him much better than I do. You should try it."

Jax looked at I-Five. Something in the droid's near-human face looked almost pleading.

"Okay, we can try." Jax had no idea what he was getting into, but he supposed it wouldn't hurt. "I-Five, I want to try and read you. Can you focus on one thing, and one thing only?"

"A word or an image?" the droid asked.

"Let's try image."

"All right," I-Five said, and that was it. He didn't close his eyes like the others or betray hard concentration. He simply looked at Jax, blank-faced, expectant.

It was a reminder of how different I-Five was from the rest of them, and that was a bad start. Still, Jax closed his eyes and tried to focus on I-Five's Force presence. It felt just as it had for the past few months, unique but dim. When he tried to focus on it, it became almost *slippery*, like a juiced-up ball that jumped from his palm whenever he tried to squeeze it.

"I'm sorry," Jax shook his head. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Maybe Master Hett should try," I-Five suggested.

"I suppose it's worth the effort," Hett admitted. "But something like this is—"

A buzzing sound filled the hold. Jax immediately jumped off his crate and hurried for the cockpit. By the time he got there, Scout and Hett were close behind him. The three Jedi crowded over the communications station as Jax flipped on the receiver.

No holo-image sprung to life in front of them, Jax leaned close to the console and said, "Is anyone there?"

"Jax Pavan? Is that you?" a woman's voice said.

"Yes. Who is this and why can't I see you?"

"This is Sheel Mafeen. I'm calling from Pol Haus' comm system. I can't seem to get the holo working."

Aside from Pol Haus himself, Mafeen was the only original member of Coruscant's Whiplash still left. "We read you loud and clear, Sheel. Where's Prefect Haus?"

"There was an emergency at the police office. Pol told me to call you."

"Did he find out what we need to know?" Jax felt his chest tighten. Hett and Scout tensed beside him.

"He did," Mafeen said. "The Inquisitor's base is at Prakith."

"Prakith," Jax repeated. He knew it was a Deep Core world, but he had no idea where. He'd have to check the navigation charts.

"They're holding your Jedi... in a ship... orbiting the inner moon."

"You said *inner* moon, correct?"

"That's right."

"Great. Thanks, Sheel. Tell Prefect Haus I knew I could count on him."

There was a pause, longer than he was expecting, before Mafeen said, "I will. Good luck."

There was a single click as the line closed. Jax exhaled and pushed himself back from the console. He looked behind him to see the entire crew packed into the cockpit.

"You heard what she said," he told them. "We're going to Prakith. Now."

* * *

The moment the transmission ended, Sheel Mafeen fell back onto the torture bed. The Togruta's red skin glistened with sweat, her bloodshot eyes stared at the bright overhead light, her mouth hung open and she panted through dry lips. Only the Force power

of her captors had given her the strength to make the call to Jax Pavan.

Darth Vader stood on one side of the bed, Hanna Ding on the other. They stared down at the prone, pathetic form of the Whiplash leader while his service droid picked up the communications console extracted from Pol Haus' apartment and carried it out of the room.

"It's done, Lord Vader," Ding said. She didn't take her eyes off Mafeen.

A combination of torture, psychotropic drugs, and raw Force power had turned the woman into a broken, mindless puppet. It hadn't taken long for Vader and Ding to extract everything from her: the communications system in Haus' room, Jax Pavan's goal, most importantly of all, the meeting at Sarillion.

That alone would please the Emperor very much, but Vader had had one last task for her, and that had been to call Jax Pavan and lure him to Prakith, into a trap.

All that was left now was to go to Praith and intercept Pavan. The information Mafeen had given him was accurate enough. It would, in fact, be quite fortuitous if Pavan and his band managed to board the prison ship and cause a fair amount of havoc before Vader killed him. It would be an embarrassment to High Inquisitor Jerec, while Vader would get the credit for preventing a disaster.

Things had fallen into place so perfectly he had to wonder if the Force was helping him after all.

He still needed to get the Emperor's permission to go to Prakith, but he would manage that one way or another. He only needed to make sure that no one knew he'd leaked the location of the Inquisitorius base to Jax Pavan.

"We will leave shortly for Prakith," he told Ding.

"I'm to come with you, my Lord?" Ding's voice wavered slightly. She was still ashamed of her failure to capture Pol Haus, as well she should be.

"Your mission succeeded in spite of your failure," he told her. "It is your duty to see it through to the end."

"Of course, Lord Vader."

They both looked down at Sheel Mafeen, still lying breathless on the torture bed. Her eyelids twitched; her lips opened and closed but made no sound. Without Vader's Force powers to prop her up like a doll, she was barely conscious.

"Inquisitor Ding," he said, "Kill this woman."

Ding flinched but didn't object. She reached for the lightsaber at her belt.

"No!" Vader commanded. "Kill her with the Force!"

Ding's hand fell to her side. He could sense her hesitation. After all this time, her Jedi training had not fully fallen away. She still flinched at the thought of killing an unarmed prisoner, especially if she had to reach out with the Force and *will* that death.

"If you do not kill this woman now," he said, "You will not come with me to Prakith. You will go back to Kuthara and fight others trainees until you are killed by one who is stronger and angrier and *better* than you. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Lord Vader." Her dry voice cracked.

"Then kill her and be done with it."

Ding nodded. She hooked her lightsaber to her belt and let her hands fall at her sides. They balled into fists. She closed her eyes. Her forehead wrinkled in concentration. Vader could feel the raw power stretching out from her, wrapping itself around Mafeen's throat.

It would take just a little more effort to snap it, but Ding hesitated. He could feel that too: the tug of conscience, the doubt as to whether she was on the right path after all, the frantic search for any other choice.

Darth Vader knew better than anyone that the only way to defeat those things was to pass beyond them, no matter how painful it was.

In the end, Hanna Ding had no more choice than Anakin Skywalker.

There was a twist, a snap, and the Togruta's head rolled limply to one side. Her mouth hung open and her bloodshot eyes stared blankly at the wall. Her chest no longer moved.

"I must see the Emperor. Dispose of the body," he told her. She was still staring at the corpse as he walked out of the room.

As he made his way through the halls of the Palace to the Emperor's lair, he sent his master a declaration through the Force: *We must speak now.*

The only response was a vague, nebulous, *Come.*

When he arrived at the vestibule he marched straight down the red carpet. Two Crimson Guards moved to block his path.

"The Emperor has told me to come immediately," he said, "Stand aside."

He could see nothing through his red masks, feel nothing through the Force, but after only a second both of them stepped aside and let him pass.

When he entered the throne room he understood everything. The sun was coming up over Imperial City, and the Emperor's throne was half-silhouetted against the gleam of gold-white morning light. Facing him was a man in black-and-red robes, with a thin black band wound around his bald head.

For perhaps the first time ever, Darth Vader was pleased to see High Inquisitor Jerec.

When he reached the Emperor's throne he dropped to one knee without even acknowledging the other man.

"You may rise, Lord Vader," his master said. "I trust the visitor you received yesterday was useful."

Vader rose quickly. "Extremely, Master."

"Excellent." Darth Sidious' chuckle sounded like cracking ferrocrete. "High Inquisitor Jerec has his own news to share. Which of you would like to go first?"

Vader wasn't going to abandon his dignity by begging for the Emperor's approval. He let Jerec step forward and say, "My Lord, I am happy to report that the vessel carrying the captured Jedi from Lucazec has arrived at Prakith. As per your orders, I've instructed Inquisitor Drayneen to keep her vessel in orbit until I arrive."

"Excellent." A yellow-toothed grin spread on the Emperor's face. "Lord Vader, I trust you, too, bring good news?"

"Very good news, my Lord. The last Whiplash leader on Coruscant has been captured and questioned. Unfortunately, she died during interrogation, but we learned much beforehand."

"Have you found a trace to your nemesis, Lord Vader? Have you found Jax Pavan?"

He still didn't know if Sidious would sense an outright lie. Thankfully, he didn't have to risk it. "I have found better, my Lord. Their leader, Thi Xon Yimmon, is going to meet with Jereveth Syne and Zozridor Slayke at the planet Sarillion in two days."

"Excellent." The Emperor laughed again. "I knew you wouldn't disappoint me again. We shall have to move quickly."

"My Lord, I would like to leave for Prakith immediately," Jerec interjected. "Djinn Altis needs to be interrogated. I know the man. I can get what we need."

The Emperor's yellow eyes flicked to Jerec, but he didn't speak. Vader knew what his master was thinking. The obvious choice would be to send Jerec to Prakith and Vader to Sarillion, and see which rival better handled his hard-won prize.

But Sidious had not become Emperor by doing the obvious.

Vader said, "I am *quite* eager to recapture Thi Xon Yimmon."

Those eyes shifted to Vader. "Yes, you were very... upset when he escaped your grasp last time."

He added a little anger to his voice. "It will not happen again."

"Lord Vader, it sounds as though this has become... personal to you."

"I very much want to end it, my Lord."

Darth Sidious smiled his sickly smile and said, "I question your objectivity, Lord Vader. And yours, Lord Jerec."

Jerec started, "My Emperor, please-"

Sidious held up one withered hand. "Not one word, High Inquisitor. I think perhaps it is not in your best interest to go to Prakith. After all, those creatures you found to restrain the captured Jedi might, ah, *disable* you even more, wouldn't they? No, I have a better idea. You will leave for Anaxes immediately and then join the fleet that will go to Sarillion. Is that understood?"

Jerec clamped his jaw shut and bowed his bald head.

"As for you, Lord Vader, you will go to Prakith and begin the interrogation of Djinn Altis and Kina Ha. If either of them is killed, you be held accountable. Is that understood?"

"It is, my Lord." He inclined his head as well.

"Then the matter is settled. Go now, both of you. You have important work to do."

Jerec and Vader bowed once more, in perfect unison, the turned and walked out of the throne room.

They passed into the vestibule and the doors closed behind them. The Crimson Guard stood like statues on either side of the door. As Vader and Jerec walked down the red carpet toward the exit the High Inquisitor said, "Take special care of those prisoners, Lord Vader. Altis is a wily old man, and Kina Ha in particular is *most* valuable to the Emperor."

"Just make certain your enemies do not evade you at Sarillion, Lord Jerec. They have a history of escaping traps."

"You don't have to worry about me, Lord Vader. Not at all."

The bitterness in Jerec's voice was plain. As for Vader, he was glad he had a black mask to hide the smile on his tattered, brittle lips.

* * *

The Emperor didn't decide to build his top-secret fortresses in the Deep Core for no reason. These places were milking hard to get to, even if you did have star charts based on Whiplash intel like *Laranth* did. You had to plot multiple lightspeed jumps around tightly-packed stars, nebulae, even black holes. Star systems moved faster here too, creating jump-routes that constantly shifted, and if your map wasn't up-to-date it was worse than useless. We had to get to Prakith as soon as we could, but even that required a certain degree of planning on Sacha's part.

For a while she clustered in the cockpit with Jax, Hett, and I-Five. I sort of lingered outside the entrance, not really understanding all the technical talk but not wanting to slip away either, because once we *did* start our circuitous course to Prakith

we'd need to make a battle plan, and I definitely wanted to be in on that, Battling wasn't my strong point either, but I wanted to know what I was getting myself into.

Once Sacha put us through the first jump, Jax decided to gather everyone in the main hold. Almost everyone was already at the cockpit, and when we went to the hold we found Magash sitting on the floor, looking up at us expectantly, like she'd just been waiting for us to get around to this part.

The odd one out was Scout.

I figured she would be in the room she shared with Sacha and Magash and volunteered to go fetch her. Sure enough, there she was, sitting on the top bunk bed. Her feet dangled over the edge. She had her lightsaber in her hands and was staring at its dark mouth.

"Hey Scout," I called up, "Meeting time. We've got an op to plan."

She didn't speak. She just nodded dully and kept staring at that lightsaber.

"Hey," I said, "You okay up there?"

She nodded again and pushed herself off the bunk. She landed right in front of me, feet clapping hard on the deck. She straightened and hooked her lightsaber to her belt with seeming reluctance.

"You don't seem to like your weapon very much," I observed.

"I built it," she said, avoiding my eyes. "It's mine. Of course I like it."

"Then you don't like *using* it?" I ventured.

She gave a little sigh. "I don't like fighting. Or killing."

"Well, that makes two of us. Three, probably, if you count I-Five. And Jax doesn't really go for it either, not unless he really, really has to."

"I had to do it once before. Kill, I mean. I haven't done it since. Even when I probably should have." She gave a deep sigh and seemed a whole lot older than she was. "I just hope I get it right this time. Whatever *right* is this time..."

"Well, don't worry about getting scared or looking like a coward. That's my job." I jabbed a thumb at my chest. "There's only one opening for that position and I claimed it long before you showed up."

She looked at me with the reluctant smile I'd been fishing for. "Magash says you're braver than you think."

I wasn't used to those kinds of compliments, especially from Magash, who didn't seem to give any kind freely. It took a little effort to brush that one casually aside and say, "Magash hasn't known me that long. Jax and Five, *they* could tell you stories, believe me."

She hugged herself. "You've been together for a long time, haven't you? Sacha and Magash seem like they're... newer somehow."

"Right. And if anything they're the ones who make me brave, Jax especially."

"Attachment makes you stronger," Scout said, half to herself.

"Or it makes you crazy, like the Jedi used to say." I shrugged. "But what do I know? I'm just an ex-hack journalist."

"It can make you just about anything. But it *can* make you stronger. I learned that from Altis, and the Mandalorians before that. I have to pay Altis back, Den. I *have* to."

"Listen, if you want to talk about owing debts, I-Five's more the guy." I scratched the back of my head. "Though if you ask me, he takes it a little too far sometimes."

That got another reluctant smile. "It's an... interesting family you guys have here."

Family? I thought that was going a little too far, but I just said, "Well, that family's waiting for you. We have to figure out how to save Altis- *your* family- and we need your help."

"That's what I'm here for," Scout said, and allowed another little smile. "Thanks, Den."

I should have been thanking her. It was nice to get a reminder that I wasn't the only one perpetually in over my head. With nothing else to say, we slipped out of the cabin to do what had to be done.

14

"We were so busy worrying about getting to Prakith and rescuing the captured Jedi that we didn't stop to worry about Sarillion. In fact, I don't think I even heard the planet's name until later. None of us had any idea how important that lonely world would end up being for us all. Except, I guess, for A'Sharad Hett. Sometimes I thought that man could see the future. It would explain why he was so grim all the time."

On the morning of his third day on Anaxes, while he was preparing to return to Farstine humiliated and empty-handed, Octavian Grant received immediate summons to Admiral Screed's home. He barely remembered to put on his uniform before rushing out the door.

When he arrived at Screed's residence, he was once again greeted by the young Twi'lek servant. Boc bowed, smiled that needle-toothed smile, and led him to the same sitting room where Screed had met him previously. The message had seemed urgent, so Grant was unsurprised to find Screed waiting for him. He was, however, taken aback by the second being in the room. He was dressed in red and black robes, bald, with a strand of black cloth over his eyes.

Screed rose from his chair to shake Grant's hand. Surprisingly, the other man turned, faced Grant directly, and extended his hand.

Grant reached out cautiously and shook it. He had a very bad feeling about this.

"Welcome back, Vice Admiral," Screed said as he awkwardly lowered his frail body back into the chair. Grant and the black-robed man sat down as well.

"It's a pleasure to be here again," he said evenly. "I'm afraid I haven't met your other guest."

"Ah, of course. Vice Admiral Grant, this is High Inquisitor Jerec."

Grant froze. If there was any being in the galaxy he did *not* want to meet right now, it was Jerec. A cold sweat tickled his neck and dread filled his gut.

He'd come expecting, or at least hoping, that Screed had taken him up on his offer to hunt Syne. Suddenly it seemed extremely likely that he was here to be punished for his activities in the Tarkus System by a man keen to take revenge.

But instead Jerec just reached out, picked his teacup off the table between them, and drank. Force magic was the only way to explain how he could move so smoothly despite being blind. Grant barely noticed when Boc appeared in the room carrying another teacup and saucer.

"Your drink, Vice Admiral," the Twi'lek said as he placed it on the table.

Grant blinked. "Yes. Of course. Thank you, Boc."

"I live the serve," the Twi'lek grinned.

Grant glanced at Jerec and was surprised to see the man's head lifted, a look of curious concentration on his face, as though he'd just heard or felt something nobody else had. When Boc left the room he lowered his head.

Grant didn't reach for the teacup. "Admiral Screed, I was under the impression that I was urgently needed. If you could explain--"

"You're an impatient man, Vice Admiral," Screed said as he calmly sipped from his cup.

"I don't like being left in the dark, sir."

"I suppose that's fair enough." Screed put his cup on the table and folded his hands in his lap. "You'll be interested to know, then,

that we recently received a crucial bit of intelligence courtesy of the Inquisitorius."

"I see." Grant glanced sidelong at Jerec. "Does it concern Syne?"

"We've just learned that Jereveth Syne and Zozridor Slayke will soon arrive in the Sarillion system to meet one Thi Xon Yimmon."

"The head of the Whiplash organization."

"I'm glad you're informed. Do you know where the Sarillion system is?"

His wracked his mind for an answer. The name was familiar, but nothing else. He ventured, "Is it near the Core, sir?"

"More or less. It's on the far border of the Koornacht Cluster, on the edge of the Deep Core and the Unknown Regions. Very out-of-the-way, which I'm sure is the point."

Either Screed had brought him out here to kill him or to give him what he wanted. He dared voice his hope. "Am I to be sent to Sarillion, sir?"

"I have decided to agreed to the terms we discussed earlier." Screed smiled thinly. "Vice Admiral Grant, you are hereby appointed commander of a special division of the Home Fleet, tasked with making sure no hostiles escape the Sarillion system."

"Thank you so much, sir." The elation inside him was tempered by the other man at the table. Jerec was there silently, drinking his tea, but his presence simply couldn't be a coincidence.

"You'll be given *Empire Star*, one of our newest destroyers, as your flag vessel, as well as a complement of support ships." Screed said. "On your way to Sarillion, you'll be joined by a detachment from Black Sword Command."

Grant frowned. "My understanding was that the yards at Black Fifteen are still in need of repair."

"Nonetheless, a few ships will be sent to aid you. I'm sending the general in charge of the N'zoth unit with them."

"Jan Dodonna." He felt everything turn to ashes.

"That's correct," Screed said easily. "You sound displeased."

"Not all," Grant lied. "Dodonna is one of the best tacticians in the Empire. I've admired his career greatly."

That was true. It was also true that Screed and Dodonna were close friends. Most important, though, was the fact that Dodonna was a renowned field commander; Grant's talent has always laid toward long-term military strategy.

If anyone was going to get credit for defeating Syne at Sarillion, it would be Jan Dodonna, not Octavian Grant. Screed had seen to that.

"Is something wrong, Vice Admiral?" Jerec spoke up.

Grant nearly jumped from his chair. He knew Force-users could sense thoughts and emotions, but he had no idea to what extent. He was fairly certain that Jerec's apprentice, Ameesa Darys, hadn't been able to directly read his thoughts, but the High Inquisitor was surely more powerful.

Grant did his best to smile and said, "I just hope a chain of command can be clearly established beforehand."

"Not to worry," Screed said. "I've made it clear that *you* are in command of all tactical decisions at Sarillion."

So Dodonna was Grant's overseer, then. Or his baby-sitter.

"In this case," he said, "I look forward to working with the general."

"I'm sure you do." Screed glanced at Jerec. "You will also be joined on this mission by the High Inquisitor."

"I've been tasked with overseeing this mission by the Emperor himself," Jerec said.

"I see," Grant swallowed. "In that case, I look forward to working with you as well."

Jerec nodded politely. If he wasn't going to mention his dead apprentice, Grant wasn't either. He hoped he could get through the next few days without hearing that witch's name aloud.

"Do we have a set time for departure?" Grant asked Screed.

"*Empire Star* sets sail at 1300 hours."

"Then I'll be there well in advance."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Grant's eyes fell on the cup in front of him. There was still a little steam, twirling off the tea's gleaming golden-brown surface. He reached forward, picked up the cup, and finally took a sip.

He actually felt a little better.

* * *

Jan Dodonna sat in his office on Black Fifteen, staring at the official written message he'd just received from Terrinald Screed.

He didn't know what to think.

He wished Screed had contacted him personally, but no, there was just the notice with his mark at the bottom. He was supposed to take a small task force to the Doornik-319 system and meet up with *another* task force en route to the Sarillion system, which Dodonna had only ever heard of because he'd tasked himself with memorizing a star chart of the Koornacht Cluster after being assigned to N'zoth.

That much he could understand, but apparently he was also expected to act as an *advisor* to Octavian Grant, who'd been assigned the role of wiping out Jereveth Syne and Zozridor Slayke's fleet as they met the leader of *another* rebel group at Sarillion.

Grant had been brought up through the Judicial Academy, just like Dodonna, and though he'd been several years behind, the Judicals had been a small club and everyone was at least vaguely familiar with everyone else. Grant's reputation, born out in the handful of times Dodonna had met him, was of an intelligent, aristocratic, aloof, but ambitious man who was more concerned with defeating his enemy and climbing ranks than anything else.

Grant had been quite good at that during the Clone Wars, and during the clean-up operation against Marath Vooroo. At Bavinyar, he'd fired on civilian settlements, officially because they'd been housing supplies and rebels loyal to Jereveth Syne. Dodonna hadn't followed the situation there closely, but that had never made sense to him. Part of him suspected that Grant had, in fact, deliberately attacked civilian targets in order to force a confrontation.

That would have been unthinkable in the old days, but after Caamas and Gibadan, and all the rumors attached to the ravaging of those planets, nothing was unthinkable any more. In the end,

though, Syne had humiliated him at Bavinyar, and Grant was stunned to see that Screed had assigned him to fight her again.

It also stung Dodonna that his friend hadn't given him the assignment directly. He was honest enough to admit that. Being tasked as an 'advisor' simply muddled the chain of command and threw things into confusion. Screed had to have a reason for this queer dual-command, but Dodonna couldn't fathom what it could be.

Because he needed to know, he patched a call into Anaxes. He waited and waited until he finally got an automated reply saying that Admiral Screed was occupied and would return his message as soon as possible.

Dodonna didn't even bother leaving a recording. He didn't think he could keep the anger out of his voice. Instead he called up *Starwind*, which was currently patrolling the edges of the N'zoth system.

After a moment, Captain Nahm's holographic image appeared over his desk. The shrunken form snapped a salute and asked, "What can I do for you, General?"

"At ease, captain." Dodonna didn't even bother to pull himself upright in his chair. "We've received new orders from Anaxes. We've got a combat mission coming up."

"We, sir?"

"I haven't decided which ships I'm taking, but you're my best captain. I want *Starwind* with me."

Ni-sihl deftly sidestepped the flattery. "Where will we be going, sir?"

"We're to go to the Doornik-319 system and meet up with a force from Anaxes commanded by Vice Admiral Grant. Then we'll go to the Sarillion system, ambush the Syne and Slayke's fleet, and destroy it."

Ni-sihl stiffened slightly. "We have proof they're there?"

"The intelligence comes from the Inquisitorius. If we go all that way for nothing, well, at least we won't be blamed."

"I see. When do we depart?"

"0600 tomorrow morning. Local time." It gave them room to prepare and plan, at least.

"Understood. Should I continue my patrol as ordered?"

"No. Come back to the station and get ready for resupply."

"Understood. Is there anything else?"

"Not for now. Dodonna out."

He flicked off the holo and sunk deeper in his chair. He closed his eyes, listened to the distant hum of the station's climate control system, and wondered what in the devil he was in for.

15

"While we rode to Prakith and hacked out the best plan we could with limited time and even more limited knowledge, well, it became pretty clear that every one of us was going to have a role to play. I am not now, and never have been, much of a fighter. For most of my life I'd duck under the table at the sight of a blaster. But there are times when you've just got to run and gun."

The three beings were immensely powerful and considerably dangerous, but they looked small and pathetic on the two-dimensional monitors in the ship's security room.

They were each being kept in a separate cell on the prison ship's main block. Their cells were spaced out so that between each one was a chamber containing the strange Ysalamiri creatures imported from the planet Myrkr. If the captive Jedi were distressed at being unable to touch the Force, they didn't show it.

Kina Ha, tall and pale and ethereal like only Kaminoans could be, sat on the floor of her cell with her legs crossed. Her eyes were closed and she might have been meditating, or even sleeping. Her head wavered very slightly atop her stalk-like neck.

Djinn Altis lay on his bunk, staring at the ceiling. Long gray hair, unbound, spread like a halo across his hard pillow. His eyes were open and his folded hands rested on his paunched stomach.

Ash Jarvee was on the floor doing push-ups. Before that she'd been doing lunges in her cell's confined space. The auburn-haired woman was no great master like the other two, but she was younger, more athletic, and probably much better in a lightsaber duel, not that it would come to that.

"Have you told them they have arrived at their destination?" Darth Vader asked the woman beside him.

"I thought it better to keep them in the dark," Drayneen said. She was a tall woman with pale skin and ice-blue eyes. Waves of dark-brown hair fell down her back. Instead of the red-and-black robes most Inquisitors wore, she was dressed in a less cumbersome jumpsuit that clung tightly to a figure that, Vader had heard, she'd used to her advantage during many interrogations.

He did not expect any of current captives to be susceptible, but he had no doubt she'd tried.

"You may begin interrogation whenever you're ready, Lord Vader," she said.

"I will begin in my own time."

"Of course, my Lord. However, I would like to make a few recommendations."

He looked at the woman closely. If she was upset that Vader had been tasked to handle the prisoners instead of her master Jerec, she was keeping hidden from her face and the Force. Like the High Inquisitor, Drayneen was very good and concealing her true thoughts.

"Make them," he said. "I will take them under consideration."

"The Kaminoan is very serene. The old man tries to make light of everything. Neither of them are afraid of dying, but if you threaten the woman, you'll get a response."

"That was already part of my plan," Vader said with an air of condescension, though in truth he'd given the matter little thought. He didn't even intend to begin work on the prisoners; he was simply biding his time until Pavan arrived.

"I would also remind you that the Kaminoan is extremely valuable to the Emperor," she said. "I'm sure he wants her alive."

"I know the Emperor's will better than you, Inquisitor."

"Of course, Lord Vader. I only wanted to reiterate her importance."

"I do not need any more of your advice. Leave me."

"As you wish. Do you need anything prepared?"

"Find my assistants. Send the Arkanian to me. Give the other a tour of this ship."

Drayneen's red lips pressed together, but she nodded and left the room. The woman had clearly been expecting to conduct full interrogations alongside her master, and was disappointed to be reduced to mere errand-girl babysitting Nera Masiq.

Vader had no sympathy for her. She was about to get an even greater surprise soon.

Vader looked at the screens again. His attention was drawn to Djinn Altis, lying on his bunk. The man had puckered his lips. The security room had no audio feed, but he seemed to be whistling.

The Djinn Altis that Anakin Skywalker had met on JanFathal had been at once ruggedly aged and preter-naturally young. Bitter experience had clashed with high idealism and a childlike sense of wonder. Altis' splinter sect had practiced a way of the Jedi that was open and welcoming, one that not only tolerated personal love but embraced it as a key to understand the Force.

To Skywalker this Jedi clan had seemed wonderful, and so bitterly unfair. For the rest of the war Skywalker had thought, again and again, about convincing Padmé to run off with him, find Altis, and live their lives together, openly, like real beings should. Yet, even to Skywalker, the past had had an inexorable pull. He knew he wouldn't escape his life, the people and circumstances that had made him, just by walking away.

Anakin Skywalker was dead. His corpse had been burned away in the fires of Mustafar. Still, when Darth Vader looked at Djinn Altis, whistling as he waited for death, he did not want to hurt that man.

Hanna Ding's entry broke him from his reverie. The Arkanian girl took her place beside him and looked at the images on the security cameras.

"These are the ones we have been called upon to break," he said, placing his hands on his belt.

Ding stared at them but did not speak. She had been very quiet the entire ride to Prakith. Since killing Sheel Mafeen the girl had become sullen and resentful. Vader had hoped that the act of cold-blooded murder would push her past her hesitation and regret and deeper down the path of the Dark Side. Now he was starting to wonder if she was truly deserving of the responsibility he was about to give her.

"We have more important matters to attend to first," he told her. "Jax Pavan will arrive here soon."

"Do you intend to kill him, my Lord?" Ding croaked.

Time and again he'd come close. Time and again a part of him had hesitated, and the Jedi had escaped. Pavan was another link to Anakin Skywalker, and a reminder that Darth Vader was not as free of the dead man as he wanted to be.

"I *must* kill him," Vader said, half to himself.

"What about the others? I've heard he runs with friends."

"They are not Jedi. They are of no consequence."

"Then we're to kill all the intruders, my Lord?"

"Does that bother you?"

"Of course not," she said, after a tiny pause.

"You lie," he said harshly. "You are still weak. You do not deserve to be my apprentice. When this is over- *if* you survive- I will send you back to Kuthara."

"My Lord, please," she snapped. "I admit that killing the last prisoner was... difficult for me. But that was not weakness of will. I still want to be the best Inquisitor I can. I want to serve the Emperor, and you."

To his surprise, he sensed conviction behind her words. He still didn't trust them. "Why did you hesitate?"

"My Lord, I was raised to be a Jedi. There are- were- parts of their... decorum that stuck with me. It makes certain things harder."

"Such as killing an unarmed woman, lying broken in her bed?"

Ding swallowed. "Yes, my Lord. Even when I was a padawan, I was never good at... fighting dirty, you could say."

"No. The Jedi were obsessed with convincing themselves of their own purity. It was their downfall."

"I know, sir." Her pale gold eyes went distant with memory. "When I was a student, I fought in a sparring competition once. It was... different from what we do under Kuthara."

"Of course." He wondered where the girl's babbling was going.

"I fought another girl. Scout was weaker in the Force than me. I thought I could beat her easily, but she beat me. She fought dirty. Used tricks. She got me in a choke hold and... I wasn't prepared for that. I thought fighting should be... proper."

"When the enemy comes, they will have weapons blazing. Will that be *proper* enough for you?"

Focus came back to her. She nodded vigorously. "You can depend on me. The Jedi, all they did, all they stood for, they're not coming back. I want to be part of what comes after. I will kill Pavan, or whoever else I have to fight."

"I will kill Jax Pavan. *You* will have a different task."

"I'm ready for it, my Lord."

"Are you?" he took a step closer, forcing her to look upward at the black curves of his mask. "This task is not what you think it will be. In some ways it will be even harder."

To her credit, she didn't flinch. "I'll do anything to prove myself, my Lord."

He found that he believed in her, so he told her what she had to do.

* * *

The russet marble of Prakith hung in space, surrounded by the dense and brilliant stars of the Deep Core. Prakith's inner moon was a dark gray disc against the planet's red profile, and in slow orbit around the moon was the Inquisitor's prison vessel, itself no more than one hundred meters nose-to-stern. From the surface of Prakith's outer moon, the prison ship was just a tiny dark speck. As

he sat in the cockpit of his R-41 Starchaser, he had to squint just to see it.

"Are you sure this will work?" he spoke aloud.

"The calculations stand. Math *is* a specialty of mine," said the voice on his headset.

He shifted in his pilot's seat and glanced behind him. Unlike the Z-95 Headhunter he'd previously flown, the R-41 was big enough to fit cargo in the rear of the cockpit. In this case, the cargo was a white astromech droid that was currently plugged into the starfighter's main com-puter and speaking to him directly with a very human-sounding voice and human-seeming attitude.

It was going to take some getting used to.

"How much longer until we kick off?" he asked.

"One minute and forty-five-point-three seconds," I-5YQ said smartly.

Hett wished he could communicate directly with the real sentients on *Laranth*. Like his Starchaser, the wide-winged interceptor was clinging to the face of Prakith's airless second moon. It wasn't thirty meters away but he couldn't call it. Any transmission, even focused and short-range, could alert the Imperials to their presence. Like-wise, neither of them could fire their engines, and neither he nor Pavan had attempted to reach out with the Force.

They had exited from hyperspace at precise coordinates behind Prakith's second moon. After that, they'd landed on the surface and waited as the moon's slow turning revealed the planet, the inner moon, and the Inquisitor ship. As they'd waited, they'd planned. The plan still seemed risky to Hett- there were far too many unknowns for his liking- but there was never going to be an easy way to break into an Imperial prison.

"Thirty seconds," I-Five said in his ear. "Get ready."

"I am," Hett breathed, and wrapped both hands around the Starchaser's control yoke.

"Ten seconds," the droid said.

Hett bent his neck back and looked at the planet, the moon, the speck of their target.

"Five seconds."

He took a deep breath.

"Go."

He fired one short, sharp burst of the Starchaser's repulsors. That was enough to kick them straight off the surface of the low-gravity, airless moon.

Then they started drifting through space. It felt like an impossibly slow crawl. Without engines the ship was deathly silent. The only sound was the rasping of his breath through his helmet's breath-mask. I-Five said nothing, and he actually wished the droid- or whatever it was- would start chattering.

His slow, dark, silent drift through the void was bringing back bad memories.

He tried to focus on the inner moon and the Inquisitor ship. Both were growing steadily bigger. As they drifted closer he waited, waited for some sign that the Imperials had spotted their tiny ship sailing dead and silent through space. No guns turned on them. He felt no cold inquisitive nudge through the Force. They simply sailed closer and closer until the prison ship nearly filled his viewport.

Suddenly I-Five said, "*Now!*"

He fired the precision reverse-thrusters. Inertia pinned him to his chair. The Starchaser's hull tapped the prison ship's, almost gently. They were right next to the emergency airlock portal.

It was like hitting the center of the target with a dart thrown fifty thousand kilometers away. Impossible as it seemed, they'd done it. That weird droid's calculations were right after all.

Hett popped the Starchaser's cockpit open. Its little air inside rushed into the void. Tightly sealed in the vacuum-proof suit he'd borrowed off *Laranth*, Hett unbuckled his crash webbing and started to float. He removed the astro-mech droid's restraints and pulled it out of the cockpit.

A flexi-steel cable bound both of them together and in turn bound Hett to his ship. He risked a small touch of the Force and pulled himself toward the prison ship's hull, dragging I-Five with him. He crossed the five-meter gap easily; the magnetized soles of his boots clamped down on the hull. I-Five, too, magnetized itself

onto the surface of the ship. Hett walked and I-Five rolled and they were quickly at the airlock's mouth.

Hett crouched and glanced inside the portal at the dark chamber beyond. Then he unclipped both lightsabers from his belt. They ignited. Two emerald blades sprung out, strangely silent in the vacuum. With two quick slashes, he cut open the latches of the airlock's outer door. The hatch swung outward, spilling invisible oxygen into the void.

Hett dropped into the gap, pulling the astromech with him. Suddenly the prison ship's artificial gravity took them and they both clattered to the hard deck.

The air was fast spilling out of the chamber but it didn't matter. Hett helped I-Five upright, and the astromech quickly rolled over to the computer input jack located next to the airlock's inner hatch.

While the droid worked, Hett detached the tether from them both and hooked it around one of the steel handles planted in the bulkhead, normally used to tether beings going EV. Once the Starchaser was securely tied to the ship, he went back to I-Five, crouched low, and input his vac suit's audio jack directly into the side of the astro-mech.

"What have we got?" Hett asked.

"Well, I've accessed the main computer."

"And?"

"I've got a map. There's only one cell block."

"We should assume they're there."

"They're Jedi. Can you sense them?"

"I've barely touched the Force since we came in-system. I'm not doing it now. It would give us away for sure. Can we get *Laranth* here too?"

"Well, from his console it looks like I can turn off all external sensors on the port side of the ship."

"Won't that trip alarms?"

"Yes, but I think I've taken care of those."

"You *think*?" He'd never had a conversation with a droid like this one.

"There's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

"Any sign they've noticed us?"

"None."

"Make sure you kill their outbound comm system too. We don't want them calling reinforcements from the planet."

"Already done."

It seemed too easy, but they had only one plan and no choice but to keep it moving.

"Stay plugged into the computer. Let me know if anything changes. I'm going over to the hatch to signal Pavan."

"I'll beep and flash with the best of them."

Hett unplugged the audio jack and walked back to the half-open hatch. He kept his feet on the deck and angled his torso out into the void.

Prakith's second moon looked so tiny. He couldn't even see *Laranth's* dark speck on its dusty surface.

But that didn't matter. Trusting they were there, that they could see him through their scopes, A'Sharad Hett ignited both emerald lightsabers and held them in an X-shape above his head.

It was the signal to come.

He watched the moon until he thought he saw one speck pushing off its surface. Then he shut off his lightsabers, went back to I-Five, and plugged the audio jack back in.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Nothing. Is Jax coming?"

"He is. And you're *sure* you've killed the starboard proximity sensors?"

"Sure as can be."

"Then we wait," he puffed.

"And hope nobody looks out a window."

* * *

Laranth kicked off the surface of Prakith's second moon the same way Hett's *Starchaser* had, but it was a much bigger ship and had needed an extra burst of repulsorlift energy. Unlike the *Starchaser*, they hadn't been able to perfectly time their kick-off to

intercept the prison ship without having to adjust course. Sacha leaned forward in the pilot's seat, intently watching the telemetry feed; sometimes she would fire tiny mirco-bursts from *Laranth's* wing-tip thrusters to fix their heading.

They weren't going to try firing their thrust engines, and Jax was afraid even the repulsors would register on the prison's ship's sensors, but it looked like Hett and I-Five had done their job. Sacha was in the pilot's spot, Jax beside her, but everyone else was crammed in the cockpit too, anxiously watching the prison ship grow bigger and bigger in their forward viewport.

As he leaned over Jax's shoulder, Den Dhur admitted, "This is *actually* going to work."

"Perfect plan." Jax sound to sound braggy, but he'd been as worried as everyone else.

"We're on course now," Sacha said, "But I'll have to fire more repulsors when we move in to the airlock."

"Can you dock with it?" Scout asked. She was hanging off the back of Sacha's chair.

"Shouldn't be a problem." Sacha glanced at the telemetry readout again. "Okay, time to move into position. Hold on."

She worked the controls again, swinging *Laranth* on its nose so the airlock on its port side faced the prison ship's hull. The black metal surface of the vessel loomed close, then quickly swung out of view. The inertia of the sudden turn made Jax's stomach lurch inside him, but one turn was all it took. He heard the familiar clanking sound that meant *Laranth's* airlock was coupling with that of another ship.

"Great job, Sacha." Jax sprung from his co-pilot's seat but couldn't exit for all the people in way. "Okay, come on, everybody out! Let's move!"

They all filed into the hold and down the aft service corridor to the airlock. Den got there first, and the squat Sullustan quickly worked the controls that opened the airlock.

There was a pop of pressure and outward rush of air as *Laranth's* oxygen rushed to fill the outer chamber of the prison ship's airlock. Waiting for them was one white R2 unit, still plugged

into the ship's computer jack, and one big man in a vac suit. As soon as he saw them A'Sharad Hett removed his helmet and began detaching the clumsy oxygen tank from his suit.

"How's it look?" Jax asked him.

"We haven't been spotted yet," Hett said. "That can't last much longer."

"Then we'd better get moving." Jax brushed the hair away from his cheek and activated the transponder in his right ear. The others all did the same. "I-Five, can you hear this? I'm on the short-range."

The white astromech swiveled its round eye toward him and a familiar voice said in his ear, "Loud and clear. Can you hear me?"

"We've got it, Five." Den said. "Have you found the prisoners?"

"I've found the cell block. It's a good place to start."

"How do we get there?" Jax asked.

"Hang a left out the airlock, go up two levels, take a right, then a left, then a left."

"How do we go up? Turbolift?" He didn't want to get in one of those unless he had to; it was too easy to get trapped inside.

"Vertical maintenance shaft, twenty meters down this corridor."

"Where are the Inquisitors?" Magash asked.

"No idea. I can't track people from here."

"Then we just have to find out."

Jax unhooked high lightsaber. Hett and Scout grasped their own weapons; the man firmly, the girl with visible trepidation. Magash took out her telescopic sparring staff but didn't extend it. Sacha had her lightsaber in her hand and a heavy BlasTech pistol on her hip.

"Okay, let's go," Jax said. "I-Five, you stay plugged into the computer. If something comes up, call us."

"Roger."

He looked at Den. The Sullustan wasn't a fighter, but he'd slung a Verpine rifle over his shoulder and had a look of determination in his big black eyes.

"Den," he said, "Keep Five safe."

"What happens if *you* need help?"

"Then I'll ask for it. But we can't leave *Laranth* unguarded. She's our only way out of here."

"Understood."

"If they come you-"

"We understand, Jax," I-Five said "I'm not defenseless either. Now go."

There wasn't much left to say. Jax turned away from his two closest friends and watched as I-Five activated the airlock's inner door. There was only a slight change in pressure this time as the heavy hatch swung open.

The hallway was dark and empty, which was better than any alternative Jax could think of. He led the way, followed by Magash, then Scout, then Sacha, with Hett covering the rear. They hurried all the way to the end of the hall where, as I-Five had said, a maintenance hatch was marked off by yellow-and-black warning colors.

Right now, those service conduits were the safest place for them to be. Jax hooked his weapon to his belt and used both hands to remove the hatch. He stuck his head inside and saw a long ladder leading upward. The shaft was narrow, barely big enough for a human to fit though, and the walls were tangled with pipelines and equipment.

They went up single-file in the same order. Jax opened the hatch two levels up and cautiously stuck his head out into the new corridor. It stretched out long in either direction, and once more it was empty.

This was too easy.

Jax pulled himself out. The others followed. Without saying a word, he crept along the right passage. The hallway branched off to the left, again as I-Five had said.

He got to the branching point and peered down the new corridor. Empty again.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Sacha said. She'd switched out the lightsaber for her pistol and clutched it nervously.

"Glad I'm not the only one," Scout muttered.

"I've refrained from using the Force thus far," Magash said. "Should I try now?"

Jax glanced back to Hett. The Jedi Master looked as anxious as everyone else and didn't volunteer advice.

"Not yet," Jax said. "We should try and get a little farther-"

Then the hall filled with the sound of clattering boots. It came from the right, and from the left. Lightsabers blazed to life. Sacha raised her weapon and fired two shots down the hall to the right. A red lightsaber burst out of the gloom and batted them into the wall.

There was no sense trying to hide now. Jax opened himself into the Force and felt dark energy rushing on him from all sides, from the right and the left and-

Two inquisitors charged out of the second hall. One was some Bothan, the other a dark-haired human girl, barely older than Scout. He parried the Bothan and Force-shoved the girl into the wall.

Before the Bothan could get off another attack, Sacha shot him once in the head. The Inquisitor reared back, crumpled. Jax shot the woman a look of thanks; she responded with a proud grin.

Then the other Inquisitors caught up with them.

Hett charged to meet the ones coming from the left: a dark-skinned human male in whirling robes and a tall woman in a tight black jumpsuit. The woman was fast; she got one jab past Hett's twirling twin blades, piercing his vac suit but not his body. Sacha adjusted her aim and started firing at Hett's attackers, but the narrow space of the corridor became a blur of blades flashing green and red, and there was no sure shot.

Magash moved to block the ones from the right: a Nikto and a Chagrian. Seeing that she lacked a lightsaber, they charged in readily. Magash extended both ends of her sparring pike and raised it ahead of her. She blocked an attack by the Nikto who, surprised, left himself open for a hard jab in the torso. Jax could hear ribs crack; the Nikto fell but the Chagrian kept coming.

Jax was trying to watch everyone at once, and when the dark-haired girl charged him he wasn't ready. He barely dodged her first swing; he moved to counter-attack but she parried easily. He tried a

lunging thrust but the girl dodged and he lost balance, leaving himself open for a killing blow.

That was when Scout charged in. She threw herself at the other girl, batting her back against the wall. The red saber met her attack every time but the girl didn't seem to be able to get through Scout's defenses either.

Jax spared a second to reach out through the Force, to feel the light and dark clashing around him on all sides.

Then he felt something that made his body freeze. After Kantaros Station he'd hoped, prayed he'd never feel it again, all the while knowing he would.

He looked down the right passage. The Nikto was struggling to stand; Magash had her Chagrian opponent backed against the wall. Past them, in the gloom at the end of the corridor, he could see the red-white spear of the lightsaber and its crimson gleam curving along broad shoulder-pads, a triangular breathing mask, and bulbous blank eyes.

Darth Vader walked down the corridor, slowly, purposefully. With the flick of a hand he pulled Magash apart from the Chagrian. The Zabrak woman squirmed, pinned against the opposite wall, helpless as Vader strode toward her with saber in hand.

Jax shouted Vader's name and rushed to save her.

* * *

When the call came, I wasn't surprised. Like I said, nothing we did *ever* went to plan.

I was squatting next to I-Five and re-examining the Verpine rifle when Sacha's voice suddenly squawked in my ear: "Den! Five! Are you there?"

"What is it, Sacha?" I-Five said quickly.

"We're pinned down on the second level! Inquisitors!"

"Understood," I said. "How long can you hold out?"

"Don't know. But Vader! *Vader's* here!"

And of course it went from bad to worse. "We're on our way! Just hold on!"

"Jax is- aw *kriff*."

I heard the sound of a blaster going off, and the thrumm of a swiping lightsaber, and the connection died. I tried to tell myself that was a good thing, that Sacha lived long enough to shut off her link instead of being cut in two by some crazy wanna-be Sith fanatic.

Then grim realization settled in my gut. "Up to us to save the day, then."

"Isn't it always?" I-Five said. "First I need to change chasses."

"Yeah, sure. I-Nemesis?"

"HRD. I want to try out those new subroutines."

"Hell of a time to test 'em."

I went over to the R2 unit and opened its dome. I'd swapped out I-Five's computing core between chasses a dozen times but it still felt weird as I pulled out the spherical white computer core, dashed inside the ship, and implanted it inside the skull of the human-looking droid body that sat slumped like a doll in the main hold.

When the core was inside I closed the skull and fingered the emergency on/off switch located on the HRD's back, right above the hips. The HRD didn't flash or light up like the R2 of Five's old protocol droid body would have. It simply opened its eyes and turned a to look at me.

"You okay?" I asked. "You good to go?"

Every time I did it I was afraid I was going to muck something up and damage his memory core and accidentally erase the I-Five I'd known for years.

"Good to go," I-Five said, and he got to his feet as quickly and nimbly as a real human would have. No matter how much I worried, it always seemed like all you had to do was pop the brain in, flip the switch, and he'd instantly be fresh and functioning.

If only our meaty bodies worked as well.

As I-Five grabbed a blaster and the other Verpine rifle, I said, "It's going to take us time to get up there."

"We might as well try the lift now," he said.

"Yeah, I guess." The rifle in my arms felt heavy and awkward. I hated fighting, always had. I-Five knew that better than anyone.

We hurried out of the ship and into the airlock chamber. I-Five stopped suddenly and looked down at the astromech sitting empty and inert beside the computer jack.

"Come, we have to go," I told him.

"I have an idea," he said. "It'll take just a sec."

* * *

A'Sharad Hett ducked beneath his attacker's horizontal swing and slammed his shoulder into the man's gut. He kept charging, knocking his opponent off his feet and into the wall. The man's breath pumped out of him; Hett jumped back one step, giving him enough space to swing his father's lightsaber upward. It sheared through the bulkhead and through the man; he dropped in two scorched halves to the deck.

Hett didn't watch them fall. He barely had enough time to pivot around and block the downward swing of his female attacker.

He caught her red saber with both of his own and pushed her back. She stumbled two steps and her shoulders hit the wall; in these narrow corridors there was almost no room to maneuver.

She started to throw herself at him again when Sacha came running in from the side. Sacha had no Jedi training and it showed; her first thrust was clumsy and the woman easily parried it. Sacha overbalanced and tipped forward; the woman swept out with one long leg and sent Sacha falling hard onto the deck.

It was enough. Hett lashed out from the side. The woman deflected one lightsaber but not the other. It swept high toward her face. Her head jerked back but not far enough. She screamed and clutched the side of her face with one hand; she still held her lightsaber up with the other.

Then Sacha, still on the ground, grabbed her lightsaber. One broad swipe took the woman just below the knees.

The woman fell face-down on the floor as Sacha bounced up, grabbing the woman's weapon on the way. Hett steadied her with a

touch of the Force. They didn't say a thing to each other, just bounded forward to help the others.

Jax was battling someone at the dark end of the corridor. He couldn't tell who; all he saw were flashes of red and green. Magash was battling the Chagrian and the Nikto, and Sacha rushed to help. Hett heard the sound of more sabers clashing and looked down the leftward branch to see Scout fighting a dark-haired human girl her own age. The two seemed at a deadlock, blocking each other's blows and never risking a strong attack.

Hett rushed in. The Inquisitor saw him coming and jumped back. He struck out with both blades. The first sizzled against her red lightsaber; the second cut low and sliced the cylinder just above the mouth. The red energy beam disappeared instantly and she dropped the sparking, smoking weapon. She tried to retreat but her back instantly hit the wall.

She stared up at Hett in terror.

His sabers flashed outward, crossing like scissor-blades. Her head plopped to the floor, rolled once, and was still.

It lay face-down but Scout still stared at it. Her blue saber sizzled in her hands. She didn't even blink.

"Scout!" he snapped.

Her eyes jumped to him. They were wide, fearful. Just like the dead girl's had been.

"It's them or us!" he snarled. "The cells are down that hall! Go! Now!"

Scout didn't speak, didn't nod, didn't blink. She just turned and started running down the hall.

Hett rushed back to the main corridor. He got there just in time to see Sacha awkwardly trying to defend herself from her Nikto attacker using two sabers at once. The woman had too much zeal and not enough training; she was going to get herself killed.

Hett rushed forward. The Nikto saw him and, like the girl, tried to fall back instead of fight them both at once. He hopped back a step and turned-

-right into the swing of Magash's pike. Something cracked; his body dropped like a dead sack of meat.

"Good timing," Sacha panted. "We need to help-"

A red blade swiped out from behind Magash, severing her right arm at the shoulder. The Zabrak woman shouted and fell. The Chagrian jumped over her falling body and threw himself with fierce abandon at Hett. His single blade was a red flurry and Hett found himself holding up both sabers in desperate defense.

Then, as quickly as it began, a red lightsaber speared out of the Chagrian's chest. Sacha pulled it out before he dropped to the ground.

Maybe she had potential after all.

Their section of the hallway was suddenly quiet. Hett and Sacha panted for breath. Magash moaned as she leaned her good shoulder against the wall; by some miracle of stubborn willpower she was still on her feet.

And down the hallway, Pavan was still holding his own against his enemy.

"Den and I-Five are on the way," Sacha steadied Magash. "They'll take you back to the ship."

"I can... stand..." Magash panted.

Hett grabbed Sacha by the shoulder. "I sent Scout ahead. Help her. *Now.*"

The woman nodded and quickly disappeared down the branching hallway. Magash let her back press flat against the wall and muttered some Dathomiri incantation against pain.

And Hett jumped over the Nikto's body and ran down the hall to help Pavan.

He could sense it through the Force now: Jax's incredible determination, and the incredible dark power he was fighting. In Inquisitor he was battling was clearly more powerful than the rest, but somehow Jax was holding his own.

When he reached the end of the corridor he skidded to a halt. Pavan and his enemy stepped apart and looked in unison at the new arrival. Cast in a green glow was a young face framed by long hair and drenched in sweat. Cast in red was a horrible black mask Hett had heard of, even seen in holo-broadcasts, but had never imagined facing himself.

"You," Hett rasped.

And, impossibly, with the same shock of recognition, Darth Vader said, "*You*."

* * *

By the time Sacha caught up with her, Scout had thrust her lightsaber into the door to the cell block and was cutting a smoldering circular portal through the layered metal. Sacha thrust her own weapon in to help, and it was only after they'd cut a full circle and Force-pushed the cut portion to the ground that Scout realized the woman was using a red lightsaber.

"Picked it up back there," Sacha said easily as she hooked it on her belt next to her other saber. "Let's go."

Scout and Sacha stepped gingerly through the portal. The cell block was just another long black corridor, only this time there were heavy a dozen doors at regular intervals along the right wall, stretching all the way to a dead end.

There didn't seem to be any guards, and Scout wondered just how many crew- Inquisitor or otherwise- were on this ship. It wasn't a big vessel but she'd expected more.

When she got close to the first door, the Force vanished.

Behind her, Sacha gasped. Scout asked, "You felt it too?"

"Yeah. It was there, I was *touching* it..."

Scout took two steps back. She reached out and felt them in the distance: Jax, Magash, Hett, the enemy they fought.

Two steps forward, and they were gone again.

"They're pushing back the Force somehow," Sacha said. "How is that *possible*?"

"How should I know?"

"You're the Jedi, not me."

Scout wasn't half the Jedi she wanted to be, but now wasn't the time for that. "Come on," she said, "Let's cut open some doors."

"Maybe we'll find out how they're blocking the Force," Sacha suggested as she turned on her blue lightsaber.

Scout wasn't sure she *wanted* to find out. It made sense, though, and in a way it gave her hope: If they were blocking out the Force here, it meant they had Jedi in the cells.

The doors to the cells weren't as thick as the ones to the detention block. Sacha went up to the first one and made four slashes: two down, two across, making a broad square hole.

Instead of using the Force to knock the cut-out portion to the ground, she gave it a good kick.

There weren't people in the cell. Scout didn't know *what* she was looking at. There were *trees* placed right next to an empty bunk, clinging to the trees were a pair of long, yellow, lizard-like animals. One of them picked up its head and looked at the intruders with four tiny black eyes.

"Is *that* what's pushing back the Force?" Sacha asked.

"I don't know," Scout said, then added, "But it's as good a guess as any."

"Let's check the next one."

Scout did the honors that time: four more cuts and a good kick. When they peered into the cell, Scout went dizzy with relief: Kina Ha was stretching out her long thin legs and rising to her feet.

The ancient Kaminoan had never been one to betray surprise, or excitement, or any of the other strong emotions that overtook young mortals like Scout, but she said in that smooth elegant voice of hers, "It is a relief to see you, Scout."

"You have no idea," Scout found herself grinning. "Are Djinn and Ash here?"

"I believe so."

Sacha interjected, "How are they pushing back the Force?"

"No time for that," Scout said, and dashed over to the next door.

She cut open that one but inside she found another strange tree, and another pair of yellow lizard-like animals staring stupidly at her. By that time Kina Ha was stepping out of her cell as Sacha was working on the next door. Scout hurried to her side as she was kicking it open.

Ash Jarvee nearly knocked her off her feet. The older woman wrapped both arms around Scout's shoulders, planted a kiss on her forehead, and said, "I *knew* you made it out, I *knew* it!"

Scout had had more direct training under Ash than anyone else in Altis' group, and she'd quickly come to mean as much to her as Master Maruk had in the Temple, but they weren't ready for a happy reunion just yet.

"Where's Djinn?" she asked, "Is he here?"

Sacha had already skipped down two cells. By the time Scout, Ash, and Kina Ha got there, Master Altis was already crawling through the smoking hole in the door and into the main hall.

He looked thinner than she remembered. A grizzly white beard had grown on his face, but he still had the same generous smile, and the same wise and under-standing gaze.

"Incredible," he said, "Absolutely incredible."

"How did you track us?" Ash pressed. "Where *are* we?"

"Hold on!" Sacha shouted. All eyes went to her. "Hi. Sacha Swiftbird. Nice to meet you. Listen, we've got to get out of here. *Fast*."

"She's right," Scout told Altis. "We've still got people fighting Inquisitors."

"Do you have a ship?" Ash asked.

"We do. Now come on-"

Scout turned for the exit and froze. Three figures stood before the cut-open wreckage of the blast doors, all in Inquisitor robes. One was a Sarkan, another a human male, and the third, at the center-

Pale yellow curls fell from her head onto her black-clothed shoulders. Her skin was gray-white and her eyes were the color of her hair. Her head had a haughty tilt and her lips were pressed tightly together. Scout remembered all of it from another place, another life, and she never thought she'd see it again.

"You," Scout's jaw dropped.

And, with a mirror look of disbelief on her face, Hanna Ding said, "*You*."

16

“Traveling with Jax was an education. I’d done my share of trekking around the galaxy, touring big-name planets like Coruscant and Kuat and scoping out worthless fringe places like Drongar, but I’d never even heard of Prakith or Sarillion until we set out ship to go there. I certainly had no idea those lonely, forgotten planets would be the setting for a turning point in all our lives.”

Sarillion may have been remote, and it may have lacked resources or habitable moons, but the gas giant was not lacking in splendor. Its face was a constantly-shifting swirl of red, brown, and orange gases and its orbit was girdled by a broad collection of rings, curiously angled in a diagonal slant in relation to the planet’s axis. Beyond the rings were a dozen small moons, and beyond the moons, clusters of bright stars and luminous gases that painted the void bright in the Koornacht Cluster.

Jereveth Syne sat in her cabin aboard *Valediction*, watching the planet’s splendor through the viewport and trying to overcome her fatigue.

Jadesei was a marvel and a treasure and a vision of a totally new kind of life, but she could also be a burden, especially when she insisted on crying for the ship’s entire night cycle and only fell asleep as the mock-daytime lights were coming on.

Jadesei was sleeping soundly in her crib, finally. Syne, dressed in only a navy blue robe, was sitting at the dining table and working on her second cup of caf. The first one gave her a quick jolt that faded just as fast. This second cup felt like it would last her longer.

She needed to be alert today. Thi Xon Yimmon was about to arrive, and the war against the Empire was about to enter an exciting new stage. Despite that, Syne couldn't feel excited. Sleep deprivation was only part of it.

Yimmon was like Slayke, a Republic patriot who wanted to restore democracy to the galaxy. That was well and good for the rest of the galaxy, but Syne had no more love for the Republic than for the Empire. If restoring the Republic also meant that Bavinyar would be independent and the scattered Bavinyari refugees could return home, so much the better, but that was a long way off. Even united, all their rebel bands could do was deal a little more pain to the Emperor.

Even after she'd met A'Sharad, it had been the hope for revenge that got her out of bed every morning. It had been her hunger, her focus, eclipsing all else. Then Jadesei had happened, and suddenly avenging her father and her world had seemed less important. For the first time in a many year she had a future, and she still wasn't sure what to do with it.

When she heard a chime at her door, her first thought was that it would send Jadesei wailing again. She jumped from her chair, dashed over to the door on bare feet, and opened it.

Sajin was standing in front of her. Blond curls spilled over her shoulders and she clasped her datapad to her chest with both hands. She still looked like a university student.

"Come in," Syne said softly.

Sajin followed her inside. The door hissed shut behind them. Syne carefully walked over to the dark bedroom and peered into the crib. Jadesei was still silent and sleeping. With a restrained sigh, she walked back to the main room. Sajin was helping herself to a cup of caf.

"You look tired, Madam."

"Don't be formal, Sajin, not now." Syne dropped into her chair.

Sajin took the opposite one. "Sorry. Force of habit."

"It's all right."

"You look tired."

"I *am* tired."

"Jadesei kept you up all night?"

She nodded. "A'Sharad is better with her, actually. He can make her sleep."

Sajin laughed. It was a light, tinkling giggle, young and innocent. Not for the first time, Syne had to remind herself that they were the same age.

"I never thought I'd see you as a mother," Sajin said.

Syne had never thought she'd be one. She'd never considered motherhood at all just like she'd never considered love at all. Like A'Sharad, she'd been raised from a young age to be something very different. And, like him, she'd hit adulthood before things ran totally off the rails.

"When you first brought the Jedi aboard," Sajin continued, "I thought it was a mistake. Everyone did. And when he started slipping into your cabin when you thought nobody was looking..." Sajin looked down into her cup. A weak smile curved her lips. "Well, I guess it worked out for the best after all."

"I never planned it," Syne said. "Any of it."

"I know. You never paid much attention to boys," Sajin smirked.

"I always thought I'd have a different path."

"You've taken one. But what you have here..." Sajin looked around the cabin. It was a tidy, neat place. It felt like home.

"It's normal," Syne finished for her. "It's what real people living a real life would have."

"You deserve a little real life. We all do."

"We won't get it. Especially not with Yimmon coming. The fight's going to get fiercer. Are you ready for that, Sajin?"

The other woman nodded, but Syne could sense her hesitation, her fear. Sajin was no soldier. No one had ever expected her to be. Despite that she'd stuck with Syne through it all, not out of patriotism but friendship.

She was probably the bravest one in the whole fleet.

Syne looked toward the darkness of the bedroom. "I don't want Jadesei to live the life I have. No matter what happens to me in the end."

"Jereveth, you shouldn't-"

"Make sure of that." She spun back to her friend and put steel in her voice. "Protect her. Keep her safe. Don't let her get dragged into my fight."

Sajin's eyes were sad, but she nodded.

"Thank you, Sajin." Syne breathed.

Grim silence filled the room. Syne took her cup, sipped it. Sajin did the same. Eventually the blond woman said, "Yimmon is supposed to arrive in two hours. What uniform will you be wearing?" Sajin asked.

It took Syne a moment to remember. She still had the dress uniform of the Bavinyar Defense Forces, though she hadn't worn it since joining her father at a conference with Marath Vooroo over three years ago. It was similar enough to the normal brown uniform her crew wore; the main additions were gold epaulets and embroidered gold piping along the collar, cuffs, and flanks.

"I suppose I can dress up for the new visitor," she admitted.

"Good," Sajin smiled. "I always thought it suited you."

After they finished their cups, Sajin left Syne to get dressed. She removed her robe and went into the closet. She pulled out the undershirt, the trousers, the boots, the jacket, and put them on one-by-one. Amazingly, Jadesei slept through it all.

In the end, she stood in front of the body-length mirror and examined herself. Her black boots were polished, her jacket wrinkle-free. The gold-braided epaulets balanced perfectly on her shoulders and her black hair was pulled off her face and tied at the nape of her neck, so that one tail fell from her collar to halfway down her back. She felt a strange twinge of regret that A'Sharad had never seen her in full dress regalia. He had once, while blushing uncharacteristically through his tattoos, admitted a fondness for women in uniform.

When he got back, she would make sure to rectify that.

She checked on Jadesei one last time, then went to the bridge to prepare for Yimmon's arrival.

Yvolton was already there, overseeing final checks. He was also in his dress uniform, which shouldn't have surprised her.

"How goes the day, Andrein?" she asked him.

"Slayke's transferring now."

The old man gestured out the forward viewport. *Scarlet Thranta's* small crimson form sat off their port bow, while *Freedom Song* drifted ahead of them, closer to the disc of Sarillion's rings. As she watched, a small shuttle dropped away from *Freedom Song* and vectored toward their ship.

"Any news on Yimmon?" she asked.

"Nothing yet. He's set to arrive any time now. We're monitoring all entrance vectors closely."

Given their location, tucked between uncharted space and the densely-packed stars of the Koornacht Cluster, there were only a handful of known routes in and out of the Sarillion system. The fleet had placed sensor buoys near all the points where a ship could be expected to revert to realspace.

When Yimmon, or anyone else, arrived in-system they'd get a fair warning.

"Have you checked in with Avit recently?"

"*Leveler* is holding position. He reports all systems normal."

"Excellent. I'll go down and meet Slayke."

"Very good, Madam."

She made her way out of the bridge and into the turbolift. As the capsule hummed into motion, she took her comlink out of her pocket and called Sajin.

"What is it, Madam?" the woman said.

"I'm going to meet Slayke and Yimmon now. Please go to my quarters and keep an eye on Jadesei."

"Understood."

Syne flicked off her comlink and stuck it in her pocket. A half-minute later the turbolift doors opened and she wound her way through the halls toward the flight deck. *Valediction's* crew was almost entirely made up of personnel from her previous flagship,

Iconoclast. The old dreadnaught had a much smaller required crew complement than the star destroyer, and they'd only been able to add a limited number of Bavinyari refugees and defecting clone troops to their ranks. Without *Valediction*'s brand-new automated systems, they'd never have been able to operate the ship at all. The destroyer was still effectively running on a skeleton staff, and Syne did not pass a single crewman until she reached the hangar.

Slayke had already marched down the ramp of his shuttle to meet a Bavinyari honor guard. The big, bearded man was dressed in the red-and-black robes he'd worn when they're first met.

"Ah, Madam Syne!" he boomed when he saw her. "You look positively dashing into that uniform. I'm so sorry I haven't seen it before."

"I haven't worn it in some time," she said as she stepped up to greet him.

"Well, no matter." He waved a hand. "Anything from Yimmon?"

"He's set to arrive any time now."

"I can't wait to get started." Slayke balled one hand into a fist and punched his other palm. "This is going to be a turn-around, Madam. It all changes today!"

They had a long way to go to victory, both of them, but his optimism was infectious. Syne allowed a slim smile and said, "Do you have ideas on what you want to *do* with Whiplash, Captain?"

"Oh, I have plenty of ideas. What you pulled at N'zoth is just the beginning. With Whiplash nabbing intel and slicing codes we can launch raids on some real high-priority targets. I'm thinking along the lines of Kuat, Bilbringi, Anaxes..."

Assaulting the citadel of the Core Worlds was a little much. She said, "Maybe one day, but we'll need more allies before that."

"With Whiplash making connections, we stand a good chance of getting them. That's what's going to overthrow the empire, Madam. Not a bunch of brave little factions all fighting local wars. We have to bind *together*, all of us. It's the only way we'll rebuild the Republic."

Her smile wilted. Slayke quickly added, "It's the only way *any* of us will get what we want."

"I hope you're right, captain."

"Of course I'm right," Slayke grinned. "I didn't brawl through the Clone Wars just to-"

Syne's comlink buzzed. She plucked it from her uniform and said, "Syne here. Report."

"Madam, a shuttle has arrived," Yvolton said. "It's Yimmon."

"Very good. Have a fighter patrol escort him to the hangar."

Syne pocketed the comlink and told Slayke, "He's on his way."

"So I heard." Slayke adjusted his robes. "Well, Madam, how do I look? I want to make a good first impression."

He held out his arms and kicked into a surprisingly graceful pirouette. His robes fanned around him as he executed a complete spin and came around to face her again.

It took effort to keep her face straight. "You make an impression as always, Captain."

"Glad to hear it." Slayke tugged at his robes one more time. "All right, then. Let's go meet our new best friend."

Syne and Slayke stepped to the head of the troop column and watched as a single small Corellian freighter soared into the star destroyer's hangar. It set down next to Slayke's shuttle and lowered its landing ramp.

Syne knew little about Thi Xon Yimmon; by his name he was a Cerean, and he supposed to be quite charismatic. In her head she had a vague idea of a big, booming man like Zozridor Slayke, only with a cone-shaped head. The one that came down the ramp was, indeed, a big man; his double-brained Cerean skull made him even taller than Slayke.

Everything else was different. His movements were purposeful and slow. When he introduced himself it was with a deep, soothing voice. Rather than exuding Slayke's feisty energy or Syne's own cold determination, Thi Xon Yimmon created an aura of trust and safety.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," he said after shaking hands, "I had no idea you'd amassed such a fighting force."

They'd gathered almost their entire fleet in a chain above Sarillion's canted rings. Syne and Slayke had agreed it was the best

way to show Yimmon they trusted him, and to display their strength.

"We've been hitting the Empire hard," Slayke said.

"I've noticed, and so have many others." Yimmon said. "I like to think we can do much for each other."

"Oh, I don't doubt that for a second," Slayke grinned and put his hands on his hips. "Well, do you want to stand around all day gawking, or do you want to sit down and figure out how we can make Palpatine's life a living hell?"

Yimmon smiled gently. "Whatever you like."

They started down the corridor back to the lift tube, this time escorted by the full honor guard. Slayke, Syne, and Yimmon walked in a single file, and when they entered the lift she found herself squeezed between two men more than half a meter taller than her. She was not normally self-conscious about her height, but she was glad when they exited into another hallway.

When they reached the conference room, Yvolton was there. Syne had agreed to his request to sit in on the meeting, though she wondered how much he, or she, would have to say; she rather expected the conversation to be dominated by Slayke and Yimmon waxing ambitious about how they were going to restore the Republic.

To her pleasant surprise, the dialogue was much more practical. Yimmon laid out the details of Whiplash's intelligence and people-moving network. Slayke gave a quick verbal run-down of their fleet, equipment, and crew. Yvolton outlined a handful of Imperial facilities he believed their fleet could destroy. As usual, his estimates were conservative.

After everyone had presented their ideas, Yimmon folded his hands on top of the table and said, "It appears our organizations have very different objectives."

Slayke was surprised. "What do you mean, *different*? We've got the *exact* same goal, getting rid of Palpy's nightmare machine!"

"Whiplash has always been about small things. Transporting refugees. Networking resistance cells on different worlds. Sharing

key intelligence. When we've tried to be more aggressive, it has cost us dearly."

"But we *have* to be aggressive!" Slayke pounded the table. "We're not going to bring the Republic back by *asking nicely*. We have to *smash* the enemy!"

"I know." Yimmon smiled gently. "And I think our organizations can help each other very much. We just have to remember that we're two very separate parts of the same whole."

"Separate, but complementary," Syne said. "We each do things the other can't."

"Exactly." Yimmon nodded. "It's going to be an interesting relationship."

Slayke looked mollified. "Well, okay then. That's good. We can make things work. I mean, Syne here, she used to be a dirty *Sep*. She wants an independent Bavinyar, not a Republic. But you know what? We made it work. And you and us, Master Yimmon, we can make it work too."

Yimmon's lips curled in amusement. "I looked forward to the endeavor."

Yvolton cleared his throat. "Now that that's settled, perhaps we should start talking about specific plans."

"Ah, that's right, it always comes down to the details." Slayke hit the table again. "Now, I think our main goal should be checking out new Imp installations in the Deep Core. Master Yimmon, if we could get—"

Yvolton's comlink buzzed. A spike of dread shot up Syne's body as he took it out and said, "This is the captain. Report."

Syne sat right next to him and could hear the tinny voice. "Captain, another buoy just went off! We have multiple contacts, inbound!"

Syne and Yvolton jumped out of their chairs. The captain said, "Do you have identification?"

"We're working on it. Sir, they dropped close to the planet. Looks like almost a dozen ships."

Suddenly the deck shifted. Syne felt the tightness of g-forces squeeze her chest, but they disappeared in an instant.

Yimmon looked confused, but Slayke knew exactly what that meant.

"Oh," he groaned, "Oh *fierfek*."

"Captain, they've put up an interdiction field!" The voice on the comlink turned shrill. "We're getting a hail."

Syne leaned over and said, "Patch it into the conference room. Now."

"One moment, Madam—"

There was a click, and then a voice filled the air. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. It was a crisp, aristocratic, not deep or outwardly menacing, but it sent a shudder through her body and filled her heart with rage.

It said, "Rebel fleet, this is an Imperial task force under the command of Vice Admiral Octavian Grant. Surrender or be destroyed."

* * *

Jan Dodonna stood on the bridge of *Empire Star* and watched the gases of Sarillion swirl like flames across the face of the planet ahead. He could see, too, the dark specks of the enemy fleet, their ion engines now aglow.

"They're attempting to take cover on the far side of the planet's rings," he observed.

"It's the only option they have," said Vice Admiral Grant.

The two officers stood near the tactical holo but faced the forward viewport. The bright stars of the Koornacht Cluster were being fast eclipsed by the gas giant's colorful face. Several ships from their task force slipped ahead of *Empire Star* as a vanguard: the *Carrack*-class light cruisers *Integrity* and *Perseverance*, plus the *Venator*-class destroyer *Impavid*. The ships that had come with Dodonna from Black Fifteen, including Captain Nahm's *Starwind*, hung behind the flagship to protect the task force's interdictor, *Closed Fist*.

Dodonna was quietly glad that his own ships would not be making the first assault. Syne and Slayke were clearly getting ready for a long defensive slog.

"Any response to our hails?" Grant asked the comm station.

"Negative, sir."

"Perhaps Syne doesn't want to show her hand," Grant muttered, half to himself. The vice admiral sounded disappointed.

The aft doors to the bridge slid open and a man in billowing red-and-black robes walked straight across the deck toward Grant and Dodonna. The general had only briefly met High Inquisitor Jerec after coming aboard and he had no idea what to make of the man.

Dodonna had fought with a number of Jedi during the Clone Wars and found them by and large admirable. He understood that this Jerec was a Jedi Master who had elected to side with Palpatine instead of the Jedi Council after the coup attempt; beyond that the workings of the Inquisitorius were as opaque to him as the original Jedi Order's had been.

What was most unnerving was the way the man *looked* at you, despite having his sightless eyes covered by that strip of black cloth. Apparently he used the Force as a replacement for eyesight, but Dodonna had no idea how far that 'sight' extended. Jerec could find him easily enough, but could he 'see' the planet in the distance, or the ships moving for cover behind Sarillion's broad slanting ring?

Force-users could be very useful, but also too damned unpredictable.

"Good of you to join us, Master Jerec," Grant said without taking his eyes off the viewport.

"I would not miss this," the Inquisitor said.

"Lord Jerec," Dodonna said, "I understand that this fleet worked with Jedi in the past. Can you sense them now?"

Jerec seemed to be 'looking' at the tactical holo. He didn't tilt his head or show any sign that he'd heard. Dodonna's eyes flicked to Grant, who seemed to be purposely ignoring the Inquisitor.

Then Jerec said. "I sense no Jedi here."

"Well, that's a relief," Dodonna said. Though he'd never admitted it aloud, he thought the full-scale purge of the Order was overkill. He had no desire to kill Jedi and, frankly, no desire to fight them either.

"I sense fear in that fleet... panic." A smile slanted on Jerec's face. "I sense much anger, Vice Admiral."

"All to be expected."

"And *you*, Admiral, you want to end this badly. It's very personal between you and Syne, isn't it?"

Grant's face twitched in annoyance. "I won't deny that."

"No wonder you went to... such lengths to win Admiral Screed's favor."

Grant shot him a look- half surprised, half angry. Dodonna frowned in confusion; he still had no idea how Grant had won approval for this mission after his past failures, but apparently Grant and Jerec did.

Apparently, it was something Grant wanted kept quiet.

Before Dodonna could follow that line of thought further, the admiral called, "Comm, tell our vanguard force to move forward. Tell them they're going above the ring to attack."

"Understood, sir."

"Tell *Enforcer* and *Indomitable* to move forward also. They're going under."

"Yes, sir."

Barring *Empire Star* and the interdicator, that was the whole of the fleet they'd brought from Coruscant. Dodonna had brought three more star destroyers from N'zoth, a formidable fighting force in itself, but he wondered if that would be enough.

"Do you want to repeat a call to surrender?" he asked Grant.

"It wouldn't do any good. They'll never lay down arms." It didn't sound like Grant wanted them to.

"Perhaps we can try again after the initial assault," Dodonna offered. Despite having a smaller fleet, Syne and Slayke would defend their position fiercely. Many good Imperial soldiers would be lost.

"Perhaps. Slayke *might* surrender. But Syne..." A tight, twisted smile appeared on his face. "Syne is going to fight to the death."

* * *

Jereveth Syne arrived on *Valediction's* bridge to hear klaxons wailing. Yvolton, Yimmon, and Slayke were right behind her, and all four of them hurried to the tactical station.

"Madam, ah, sirs!" the ship's first office snapped a salute. "As per your orders, we've taken cover behind the planet's rings."

"Have they started moving yet?" asked Slayke.

He gestured to the holo. "As you can see, they're sending in their vanguard force. Two light cruisers and a destroyer coming around the top, another cruiser and destroyer under the bottom."

"Lieutenant, where's your comm station?" Slayke asked. "I need a direct line to *Freedom Song*."

"Right this way, sir."

As the officer led Slayke off, Syne, Yvolton, and Yimmon examined the display. Five ships held back from attacking and sat instead in Sarillion's mid-range orbit: two *Victory*-class destroyers, one *Venator*-class, an interdicator, and a brand-new *Imperial*-class star destroyer. Syne had never faced on of those 1600-meter behemoths in battle before and had never wanted to until now.

At this moment, all she wanted was to reach out and crush Admiral Grant's flagship with her bare hands.

"They're sending their smaller ships through first," Yvolton observed. "When they try to pass around the rings we'll be able to box them in."

"We can try," Syne nodded.

"What about *Leveler*?"

"Avit stays where he is right now. We'll bring him out when we need him."

When, not *if*. Some of those ships would slip past the ring and they both knew it.

Yimmon cleared his throat and said, "I am not an expert in fleet combat, but shouldn't our goal be to destroy the interdicator?"

"We're not capable of that right now." Syne shook her head. "We'll have to draw them into lower orbit and pick off what ships we can."

The odds of them taking out all of Grant's fleet one-by-one were astronomical. They didn't have Jedi magic, Mandalorian mercenaries, or mutinous clone commandos to help them this time.

She hadn't called Sajin yet. She hadn't checked on her child. No matter what happened to her, to her fleet, she had to find a way to get both of them out of here.

But the Imperial ships were getting close, and there was no time for anything except a fight.

Slayke bounced back from the comm station and said, "I've sent *Freedom Song* and both gunships up top. *Bright Dawn* and *Plooriod Bodkin* are going below."

"We'll take *Valediction* to join them," Syne said. "What about the carrier?"

"*Fat Bastard* is pumping out her snubfighters. I'm hoping some of them can slip through the rings and hit the Imps in the backside."

"We're going to have to hit them from *all* sides," Yvolton said.

"Then that's what we'll do," Syne said. "Andrein, launch all our fighters."

"Very good, Madam."

Yvolton went to deliver orders; Slayke went back to the comm station. Syne watched the fleet break apart on the tactical holo while the Imperial ships inched closer. The two destroyers were already launching their fighter complements.

"I'm sorry it happened like this," Yimmon said from the other side of the station. "It's entirely possible the Imperials followed me here."

"We can assign blame later. Right now we *fight*," she told him.

Thi Xon Yimmon had the air of a peacemaker, not a warrior, but he nodded understanding.

Valediction dove and veered away from the planet's gravitational pull. The forward viewport shifted from a show of swirling gases to luminous stars to sparkling rings made of floating

ice particles and rocks. Through the rings' veil, Syne could see one star destroyer and one *Carrack*-class cruiser approaching head-on.

A swarm of fighters burst ahead. Dozens of different starfighter types from both *Valediction* and *Freedom Song* slipped beneath the rings' edge to meet the Imperial fighter screen or tried to nimbly slip through the ice and rock particles. Tiny explosions began to dot Sarillion's rings, but Syne couldn't tell if the fighters were blasting their way through or colliding with drifting rock.

Yvolton called for *Valediction* to turn her broadside to face the incoming ships. The view from the bridge shifted again, sliding to face a band of stars squeezed between silver rings on one side and the flame-colored planet on the other. Syne turned her attention to the tactical holo. *Bright Dawn* and *Plooriod Bodkin* were holding off of *Valediction*'s stern and bow respectively, giving the destroyer a clear range of fire.

The bridge vibrated as *Valediction* brought her full batteries to bear. Waves of green turbolaser fire washed across space. Despite her skeleton crew, *Valediction*'s gunnery computer was able to synchronize barrages perfectly, and the approaching destroyer was too big a target to miss.

The Venator's forward shields were on full, and she managed to absorb volley after volley of turbolaser blasts. Her support cruiser used her massive hull for cover and began moving past her.

Syne told the tactical lieutenant, "Tell *Bodkin* and two fighters squads to intercept that Carrack cruiser. *Bright Dawn* needs to move forward and attack the destroyer's flank."

"She'll have to take a lot of fire, Madam."

"She'll give a lot too. Do it."

"Yes, Madam."

Syne watched the tactical holo as *Bright Dawn* started a wide arc toward the enemy destroyer. *Plooriod Bodkin* moved forward to engage its enemy counterpart. And the destroyer had slipped most of its body past the veil of Sarillion's rings.

Valediction's bridge shook as her shields absorbed the first volley of enemy turbolaser fire. She kept firing broadside volleys

that flashed and danced green lightning over the destroyer's forward shields. It couldn't take much more.

Syne stalked away from the tactical station toward the forward viewport. The command deck jutted slightly forward from the main command tower and the viewport afforded a narrow look at the ship's flanks. When the deck shook again, she steadied herself with a hand against cold transparisteel and watched another of *Valediction's* volleys arc toward the destroyer.

She got there just in time. The shields flared, died. Green plasma chewed through the ship's bow. The destroyer's engine-flares weakened as it tried to reverse course. Smaller explosions began to dot the its surface, marking shots landed by the swarming starfighters.

By that point, *Bright Dawn* was coming around the destroyer's flank. Clinging close to the planetary rings, she delivered her own volley onto the destroyer's star-board side. Laserfire scattered across dying energy shields and the destroyer struggled to realign its guns and return fire.

Then there was a burst of fire, and the destroyer's twin command towers vanished. A cheer went up across the bridge as its engines died and it began to be drawn toward the gas giant.

The joy was short-lived. Something exploded beyond the destroyer's dead hull, and then something else. Syne hurried back to the tactical holo to see empty space where both Carrack cruisers had been fighting it out.

Slayke was already there. His broad face was twisted in an angry scowl. "We lost *Bodkin*."

"I'm sorry," she said honestly. She knew how much that ship had meant to him.

Slayke forced a toothy grin. "It was worth it to take down that destroyer, wasn't it?"

"Indeed." She gave her own tight-lipped smile.

"Unfortunately," Yimmon said, "Things aren't going as well elsewhere."

She shifted her attention to the battle taking place over the rings' upper edge. One Carrack cruiser was drifting in space, but

the other Imperial ships had crested the ring and were diving deeper into the gas giant's gravity well. The destroyer was exchanging heavy fire with *Freedom Song* while both gunships were trying to hold back the Carrack cruiser even as enemy fighters threatened to overwhelm them.

"The other destroyers are holding position in mid-orbit," Yimmon pointed out.

"Then we help them! Now!" Slayke shouted to Yvolton, "Captain, we've got to fall back!"

"Do it Andrein," Syne said.

Valediction's engines strained as she readjusted her heading. She was deeply affected by the gas giant's powerful gravity and it took effort to climb outward to the rings' far edge.

Bright Dawn and the starfighters were smaller and nimbler. They cut above the rings' glimmering face toward the distant firestorm.

Yvolton came over to the tactical station and told Syne, "Now may be the time to summon *Leveler*."

"We can only use that trick once."

"We may need it now. We can't afford to lose *Freedom Song*."

"You're damned right we can't!" Slayke interjected.

"If we're going to use *Leveler*, we have to lure that destroyer closer to the planet," she told him.

"Good thing we've got bait. I'll put the call in now."

Slayke hurried over to the comm station. It was then that Syne noticed Yimmon watching her with a confused frown on his face.

"A surprise," she said simply.

"Then I pray it's a good one."

* * *

Empire Star continued to hold her position in Sarillion's middle orbit. From what Dodonna could tell as he watched the fight, half through the viewport and half on the tactical screen, Admiral Grant didn't seem to particularly care about losing *Enforcer* and its support cruiser. His fleet was much larger than Syne's, and it

seemed like he was willing to suffer a lot of damage in order to grind down her resistance.

Impavid was having a much better time of it. The destroyer had crested the rings and was now allowing itself to be pulled toward the swirling gas giant. The cruiser Grant identified as Slayke's flagship, *Freedom Song*, was in retreat and *Valediction* was struggling to help. Dodonna looked out the viewport just in time to see one of Slayke's gunships vanish in a burst of flame. The other turned and ran even as *Integrity* pounded its aft shields and two full squadrons of brand-new TIE fighters continued pursuit.

"*Impavid* may need help," Dodonna told Grant. "*Valediction* barely took any damage fighting *Enforcer*."

"You're quite right," Grant said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you should fly in yourself to deliver the killing blow," Jerec suggested.

Grant fought a scowl. "That would be unwise at this time."

"But that *is* what you want."

Dodonna was getting the impression that Jerec *enjoyed* toying with Grant, though he had no idea why. They had a battle to fight and normally he wouldn't care, but Jerec's earlier taunt about Screed lingered in his thoughts; it hinted at something he didn't like.

"We could send *Starwind* or *Spearhead*," Dodonna suggested. "A *Victory-class* versus a *Victory-class*."

"You have a point, General," Grant nodded and told the tactical officer, "Order *Starwind* to advance. Tell her to prepare to go over the top."

"Yes, Admiral."

Dodonna hoped Captain Nahm would get to the fight just as it was ending, in time to crush Syne but after the most dangerous brawling was over.

He stepped closer to the viewport to watch the glow of *Starwind*'s three blue-white engines as it advanced toward the planet. Far beyond the outer line of destroyers, *Impavid* was plunging deeper still toward the gas giant's swirling surface.

Freedom Song seemed determined to keep fleeing the destroyer even if it had to plunge into Sarillion's stormy upper layers.

That kind of pressure would crush a *Recusant*-class cruiser as well as *Impavid*. Neither vessel was designed for normal atmosphere, let alone the high-pressure systems of a gas giant.

Freedom Song seemed to have plunged as far as it could go. Like an animal with its back to the wall, it pivoted to face its attacker. *Impavid* unleashed a burst from its forward batteries. *Valediction* wasn't close enough to help. It wouldn't be long now.

Then something emerged from of churning storms. At first it seemed like one gray fleck against so much red and orange. Dodonna stepped closer, right up to the viewport, to get a better look.

It burst from Sarillion's upper atmosphere like a spearhead. Trails of scarlet gas unfurled off the vessel as it charged toward *Impavid*'s exposed starboard flank with all guns blazing.

Few ships could withstand the high pressure of a gas giant's atmosphere, but *Leveler* was a landing craft, designed to operate on the most hostile planets imaginable. *Impavid*, caught by surprise, didn't have a chance.

Leveler's blasts tore through the destroyer's weak star-board shields and ravaged its flank. *Impavid*'s engines started to fail. *Freedom Song* pulled closer and began pounding its stern. A gunship and a frigate arrived to help finish it off.

Behind him he heard Grant snap, "Pull *Integrity* back! Pull it back!"

Someone said, "Admiral, they're giving chase!"

Dodonna, though, couldn't take his eyes off *Impavid*'s fiery death. When the destroyer's engines totally died, it tumbled into the gas giant's atmosphere and disappeared.

The gunship and frigate gave chase to *Integrity*. Within minutes the support cruiser, too, was dead.

Seething silence fell over the bridge. Dodonna was almost afraid to look at Grant. The admiral remained by the tactical station, hands balled to fists at his side as he stared at the hologram with his jaw clenched tightly shut.

This time, not even Jerec looked amused.

"Admiral," a lieutenant said, "*Starwind* requests instructions."

Grant didn't respond. Before the lieutenant could ask again, Dodonna said, "Tell Captain Nahm to hold position."

"Yes, General."

From the communications station, an officer said, "Admiral, we're being hailed by *Valediction*."

Grant took a deep, deep breath and said, "Lower the jamming field. Put her on."

Dodonna only knew Syne by name and was surprised to see a young woman on the holo that sprang up in front of Grant. Her round white face seemed set in a scowl above a uniform decorated with bright trim and epaulets. If this was her last fight, she was going down in style.

"You put in a strong effort, Admiral," she said. "If you want to waste any more ships, we'll be happy to help."

"You're still outgunned and outnumbered," Grant said.

"We always have been," Syne said without smiling.

"Miss Syne, you are not leaving Sarillion alive. You know that. If you, Slayke, and Thi Xon Yimmon personally surrender, I am willing to let the rest of your people go."

"You've already tried something like this before. It didn't work then, did it?"

"You have no place to run this time."

"If you want to come and get me, Admiral, you know where to find me," Syne said, and her holo shrunk to nothing.

* * *

Jereveth Syne stepped away from the communications station and let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding.

"You've made him mad now," Yvolton muttered. She couldn't tell if he approved or not.

Slayke said, "Madam, I'd like to get to *Freedom Song* while the battle's in a lull. My people need me."

"Of course." She looked up at the big, bold captain, and she knew she probably wouldn't see him again.

Slayke may have been thinking the same thing. With uncharacteristic gravity, the big man snapped a crisp, formal salute. The small woman returned it.

"It's been a pleasure, Madam, and an honor," Slayke said, and then he hurried off the bridge, trailing his cloak behind him.

"What happens now?" Yimmon asked once Slayke was gone.

Syne let her gaze drift to the viewport. Sarillon's rings glimmered in front of them, and Koornacht's bright stars twinkled in the distance, but between those she could see the gray shapes of Grant's five star destroyers.

"We wait," she said. "He'll come for us soon enough."

17

"I am, generally, a suspicious guy. Maybe even paranoid. Given the life we were living, the battle we were fighting, I dare say it came naturally. The mission to Prakith should have raised some red flag with me, but it didn't. Maybe it was because things just happened too fast, I don't know, but it never occurred to me that this whole thing might be a trap."

They rushed forward through the narrow confines of the detention block: one Sarkan and one human, both with scarlet sabers in their hands.

At the far end, Scout stood in the middle of the circle, surrounded by Kina Ha, Master Altis, Ash, and Sacha. All of them were locked away from the Force; without it, neither Kina Ha nor Altis were very capable of fighting.

"Who wants an extra?" Sacha called as she unclipped the Inquisitor lightsaber from her belt.

"Right here," Ash held out a hand. Sacha lobbed her the cylinder and she caught it easily. Red light sprung from her fist.

Sacha had good senses and fast reflexes; Ash was the best duelist in Altis' clan. Scout stood there, between the two old Jedi Masters, and watched the women run to meet the enemy.

Ash caught the Sarkan's red blade on her own. Sacha started with a mad thrust that threw her and the human Inquisitor both off-balance.

Sabers clashes and sparked but it all seemed unreal. Everything seemed unreal. Scout couldn't feel any of them in the Force; Ash and Sacha, both Inquisitors, they were like puppets moving on strings.

And from the opposite end of the hall, Hanna Ding stared at her.

Scout had been sure Hanna was dead, as dead as Whie and Lena and all the other Padawans who'd been in the Temple during the Jedi Order's last awful night.

But Scout had survived. She'd fled. She'd sneaked out the back way and hitched a ride with Kina Ha all the way to Mandalore. And Hanna-

Hanna had always been a prideful girl. It had made her strong and rigid and weak. She'd been one of the most talented padawans, but no one had liked her. Scout hadn't. She was always arrogant, cold. Lonely. The time she'd beaten Hanna with a dirty trick at the dueling contest had been the highlight of her mediocre career as a Jedi padawan.

And now, Hanna Ding was a servant of the Empire.

Scout couldn't touch her through the Force just like she couldn't touch anyone else. She could only lock eyes with the girl across the distance, through the clash and flash of lightsabers.

Altis placed a hand on her shoulder. He knew her fear of fighting, of killing. She'd done it once on Mandalore, cut a man in two. She'd watched one half of him fall on top of the other. She could still see it if she closed her eyes and remembered. Even when she'd fought the other Inquisitor in the corridor, a girl barely older than her, she'd been too scared to strike the killing blow.

Instead she'd had to watch in horror as A'Sharad Hett struck it for her.

She was sick of having other people save her.

Scout's lightsaber sprung to life. She croaked, "I have to do it."

"Scout-"

"I have to do it *myself*."

She stepped forward. So did Hanna. Between them, two fights still raged. Sacha was trying to back her enemy toward the cut-open

door to Kina Ha's cell. Ash was trying to land a quick thrust through the Sarkan's defense.

Scout maneuvered around Ash. Hanna stepped around Sacha as her opponent backed into the wreckage of the door and tumbled back-first into the cell. Sacha quickly drew her pistol and fired, but Scout hardly noticed.

She and Hanna fell against each other. Sabers crackled, red-against-blue. Hanna swung, she parried. She tried to thrust back but the Arkanian skirted away.

Hanna backed toward the door. Scout followed, staying just out of reach of a saber-thrust.

"I didn't know you'd survived," she said. She didn't know what else to say.

"Likewise," Hanna breathed.

"You joined the Inquisitors. You *hunt Jedi*."

"Scout, you don't understand-"

"You *kill* other Jedi!" The dead came to her in a rush: Whie and Lena, Ahsoka Tano, Arligan Zey, that Jedi on Lucazec whose name she'd never know.

"Scout, wait-"

She lunged without willing it. Hanna parried the blow and tried to wrestle her blade up for a strike but Scout batted that back.

"I never killed any Jedi!" Hanna protested. "I didn't-"

Scout struck, knocked Hanna a step back. She swung again; this time Hanna parried and managed an attack of her own, but Scout blocked it. Their lightsabers pressed together, sizzled.

She stared into Hanna's pale eyes and saw the same girl she'd sparred against years ago.

She pulled back. Hanna attempted a counter-attack but she parried it easily, then jabbed her saber-tip forward. It pierced Hanna's left shoulder. Still holding her saber up with her right hand, the girl groaned and stumbled back until her calves pressed against the ruin of the cell block's blast doors.

Scout took one step forward, then another, and then the Force came back.

For a long moment she felt dizzy with the inrush of sensation. The Jedi behind her were still shrouded, but she could stretch herself through the corridors ahead and feel Jax, Magash, and Hett.

She could feel Hanna Ding blocking her way: anger, pain, fear, desperation, the desire to escape and the knowledge that escape was impossible.

And for a moment she thought she could feel, just barely, the lingering Force-essence of those good Jedi she'd known who'd fallen to the Empire's blades.

"Scout!"

Altis had bellowed her name, louder than she'd ever heard him before. She turned to see him standing just meters behind her. Ash and Sacha and Kina Ha all stood behind him; the other Inquisitors has fallen.

Then she realized she'd hefted her blade with both hands above her head. Rage had taken her, dark rage, and before she even understood what had happened. Scout lowered her weapon, slowly, and looked at Hanna Ding trembling in front of her. Strong and rigid and weak and lonely; she hadn't changed after all.

Ding turned off her lightsaber and tossed it at Scout's feet. She said, "Enough. I surrender."

"Good," Sacha said, "Then let's just- Agh!"

Scout turned around to see Ash wrestling a blaster pistol out of Sacha's hand. The red-haired woman stuffed it in her belt and said, "Not now. Let's just go."

"Wait!" Hanna said. Hard stares swung at her; she held up both hands. "Please. I can't do this any more. Take me with you."

"*This* we don't have time for," said Sacha. "Ash, just stun her!"

"I can help you!" Hanna said. "Please! I came here with Darth Vader-"

"*Vader?*" Scout gasped. "Then Jax and-"

"This is a trap!" Hanna sputtered. "We- *he* captured the Whiplash leaders, made them tell *you* to come here!"

"You mean Sheel?" Sacha's voice was hollow. "Pol Haus?"

"They're dead!" Hanna choked. "And they know about Sarillion! The *Empire* knows! They're springing their trap *right now!*"

It was too much. Shock eclipsed anger and Scout couldn't even move.

"We need to leave *now*," Altis said behind her. "And we take her too."

And then there was no time for anger, or shock, or questions, or anything else.

They ran.

* * *

Three men stood in the darkness at the end of the corridor, each one washed in the glow of his lightsaber.

Jax Pavan, cast in green, panted and blinked sweat from his face. He didn't know how long he'd desperately fought back his enemy's attacks alone. He didn't know how he'd survived the fight.

A'Sharad Hett stood with two spears of emerald light held vertically in front of him. The light softened the harshness of his tattoo-lined face but didn't hide the anger and confusion in his eyes.

The man who had once been Anakin Skywalker stood in wash of red. It gleamed on the curves of his black armor and disappeared in the black folds of his cape. His mask was turned to face Hett.

They all stood a saber-thrust's length from each other. None of them moved.

"You're outnumbered now," Jax told Vader. "Do you really think your one sword can handle three of ours?"

Vader didn't respond. He just kept staring at Hett. Jax wanted to draw this pause out as long as he could; every second pulled vital breath into his lungs and strengthened his aching body.

"It's over, Vader," he said. "Our people are in the cell block, freeing your prisoners. We're going to get out of here. And then we'll never see you again."

Vader's head swiveled to face him. "Do you really think you can escape *me*, Pavan?"

The Sith Lord sounded winded. Good. "I've done it plenty of times before."

"And I have found you again every time," said Vader. He swiveled his head back toward Hett. "*You* I did not expect, A'Sharad."

Hett flinched. "Who are you? Were you a Jedi?"

Vader stared and didn't answer. Jax couldn't remember what kind of relationship Hett and Anakin had possessed, but it had clearly been *something*.

Vader looked back to Jax. "You always find new ways to surprise me, Pavan. You're to be congratulated."

"I don't know who you were," Hett said, "But I know what you are now."

"You have no idea what I've become. Neither of you do. You are both too afraid to embrace the Dark Side of the Force."

"Fear has nothing to do with it," Jax said.

"You've changed since we last met, Pavan. You seemed *smaller*. What happened to the dark knowledge in your head?"

Hett's glance flicked at him, questioning. Jax hadn't explained to him about Darth Ramage's holocron, the forbidden knowledge he'd taken to use at Kantaros Station and then had flushed from his mind by the Dathomiri witches.

He certainly wasn't going to explain now.

"I had it removed," Jax said simply, hoping to draw this pause out as long as possible.

Vader laughed a booming bitter laugh. "You *are* afraid, Pavan. And you, A'Sharad..."

He swiveled back to stare at Hett. Jax felt tendrils of Force energy reaching out, probing the Jedi Master's obdurate mind. Hett flinched at the intrusion but stood firm and batted it back.

With muted awe, Darth Vader said, "You are *not* afraid..."

"No," said Hett, "I'm not."

Then he charged.

Vader caught Hett's first blow with his lightsaber and nimbly dodged the other. Hett struck again; this time Vader blocked his right saber and grabbed his left hand by the wrist, squeezing it so hard the Master let out a cry of pain.

"Still clinging to your father's weapon, A'Sharad?" Vader growled. "You've come this far and you are *still* a child."

"Who are you?" Hett snarled. "*Who?*"

Jax lunged in from the side. Vader angled his lightsaber to catch it, then Force-shoved Hett backward. The big man landed hard on the deck while Vader struck a series of blows against Jax's green blade.

Jax parried one attack, then another, then a third. He ducked low and swiped at the control panel on Vader's chest, but the Sith evaded with surprising agility.

"Enough, Pavan," Vader grated.

Jax looked over his shoulder. Hett was struggling to his feet. He still clutched a lightsaber in either first. Beyond him, further down the hall, where the lighting was better, he saw humanoid forms moving, running-

He felt three brilliant new minds in the Force, minds he had never known before.

He looked back at Vader and bore his teeth in a proud angry grin. "Looks like we beat you again."

Before Vader could respond, Hett threw himself forward. Twin sabers beat down on Vader's one. The Sith lord staggered back under the savage attack. Jax could feel the raw, pure anger burning off Hett in the Force. An awful, feral scream burned from the Jedi Master's throat.

Then Vader twisted to the side, letting Hett's blows glance off his blade. Hett's momentum carried him forward. Vader's free hand grabbed his left forearm and snapped it backward; Jax could hear his elbow shatter. Vader's other elbow snapped up and jabbed into Hett's face. The master's head fell back.

Vader tossed him aside like a doll. His twin lightsabers went rolling down the hall.

Before Jax could do anything else, an invisible hand grabbed him by the neck and pulled him off the floor.

The vice squeezed his trachea. One hand went to his neck on instinct but the other still held his lightsaber. Vader suspended him

in the air, well out of striking range, but he couldn't bring himself to drop his weapon.

He knew that if he did, he would surrender to the black and never return.

"You are, *weak*, Pavan," Vader growled. "You have only survived this far through *luck*. Now your luck has *finally* run out."

The cartilage in his throat was snapping; he could *feel* it. Pain stabbed tiny needles through his neck. Darkness blurred his vision.

Behind him, a voice called, "Jax!"

He realized it was Den's voice. Then, a moment later, he heard the sharp tang of rifle-fire.

Vader raised his saber, deflected two blasts into the wall. Jax felt the grip on his throat loosen. Another volley followed, and another joined in; two people were firing at Vader.

The Sith let out a cry of frustration and let Jax fall. He batted back rifle-shots with his saber and caught two more in the palm of his free hand.

"Jax!" Den called, "Move! *Now!*"

He heard the high electronic wail of an astromech droid. He picked his head off the deck to see I-Five's white R2 chassis racing toward him as fast as its wheels could go.

Den shouted, "Jax, Run!"

The R2 swerved around Hett and raced right past Jax.

"Run!" Den screamed.

Jax didn't look back. He pushed himself off the ground and lunged forward right before a massive explosion shook the corridor. All the lights went out but the far end, where Vader had been, where I-Five had just raced, now roared with the fire and smoke of an explosion.

Jax stared at the fireball. He couldn't see Vader. He could *feel* him in the Force, hurt and angry, but he couldn't find I-Five at all.

"Oh, Five," he groaned. After all they'd gone through together, after all I-Five and his *father* had been through, it shouldn't have ended like this.

Suddenly Den was there, grabbing his arm. "Kark it, come *on* Jax!"

Hett staggered to his feet. One mangled arm hung at his side. His good one still clung to a lightsaber.

"Where is it?" Hett cried over the inferno. "My father's saber? Where is it?"

Jax looked down at his own lightsaber. Somehow he'd never let it go.

"Where is it?" Hett was almost shrieking. "It's my father's! *Where is it?*"

"I see it!" Den stabbed a finger at the dark.

He pulled Jax forward. Hett followed. With his Sullustan eyes Den managed to spot and pluck one metal cylinder off the floor. Hett wasn't in any shape to hold it so he stuffed it in a pocket and kept dragging Jax forward.

Vader and his fire kept burning behind them.

Den led them into a lift tube. Jax and Hett both nearly collapsed; only the lift's walls kept them upright. Jax felt physical anguish rippling off of Hett in the Force.

Jax's physical pain was comparatively minor. It was everything *else* that hurt.

"Oh, Den," he rasped. Every word scraped painfully from his throat. "I'm so sorry..."

"It's okay, Jax," the Sullustan squeezed his arm. "We're all okay."

"I-Five..." Jax squeezed his eyes shut before the tears could run out. He couldn't say any more. It was so awful and so inevitable. That droid had been blindly loyal to him since the day they'd met. Time and again I-Five had risked his life for the son of his old owner, his best friend. Now he'd chosen to make the final sacrifice.

The lift doors slid open. Jax opened his eyes, turned his head, and saw I-Five standing outside the lift.

Den helped Hett stagger into the hall, where Sacha and a red-haired woman with a lightsaber on her belt helped him to the ship.

Jax just stared at the oh-so-human face of the HRD droid until it clicked.

"I set the astromech on remote control," I-Five said. His hands were on his hips; his tone was impatient. "It's a shame, you know. That body was pretty useful."

"Oh," Jax breathed. "Oh, don't do that to me again."

A tiny smile curved I-Five's lips. "Miss me, would you?"

"Don't even *start*."

Then Den popped in beside the droid and said, "Get on *Laranth* or we leave without you!"

All three of them ran.

* * *

What I want to say is that we all piled into the ship, flew off to some beautiful resort planet, and basked in the glow of a successful mission, but that's not what happened. Not at all.

We were in pretty bad shape. Through some act of ridiculous willpower, Magash got from the second deck to the ship under her own power, after which Ash laid her out in her bunk and slapped bacta patches on the stump of her arm. Hett still had his limb but it had been twisted so bad it hurt just to look at it. Kina Ha, our spindly ethereal Kaminaoan newcomer, did some Force-magic healing to reduce the pain and Altis, our scruffy old human one, put together a sling from some cloth and wire framing he found in the supply room.

Jax was shaken, and his throat was bruised so bad it hurt to talk, but otherwise he was okay. I was okay. I-Five and Scout and Sacha were okay.

Sacha was the one who flew us out of there. She broke us off from the prison ship and kicked us into lightspeed. We didn't have a chance to recover Hett's Starchaser, and he couldn't have flown it anyway.

Once the cockpit viewport was flashing all the whites and blues of hyperspace, those of us who could gathered in the main hold.

We had a lot to talk about.

Hanna Ding sat in the center of the room. The rest of us were ringed around her like guards, which we basically were. The Arkanian girl sat slumped on the floor. After being given a fast body-search, she'd lost the black-and-red Inquisitor's cloak and had

on only a sleeveless black tunic underneath that contrasted sharply with the paleness of her shoulders, hair, and face.

Jax lead the questioning. He stood in front of her with his arms crossed sternly over his chest. I sat on a crate behind his right, I-Five on his left. Sacha watched sullenly from a spot against the wall. Altis and Kina Ha stood behind the girl; their eyes bored into her back. Hett sat between them, silent and glowering, his arm in a sling.

And Scout was cross-legged in front of Ding. Without words being said, she'd taken responsibility for the captured girl. Everyone understood that.

"Explain it again," Jax said. His voice scraped and I could tell it hurt him just to speak. "You came to Prakith with Darth Vader."

"This was all a trap," Ding said. "And I... I helped him."

"Pol Haus is dead," I said. I hadn't liked or even really trusted the sloppy, shifty Zabrak when he was alive. I was surprised by how his death affected me. I was sad, yes, but more than that I was angry.

"Vader and ISB suspected Pol Haus was part of Whiplash," she continued. "They had for a long time."

"How did Haus die?" I-Five asked.

The girl eyed him without speaking. I-Five confused her and she didn't want to show it; it was exactly the same way Hett and Scout had first reacted to him.

"How did he die?" I echoed.

Ding sighed. "Haus was asking around for the location of the base on Prakith. Someone tipped off Darth Vader. He figured it was you."

Jax tensed. I could see the surprise on his face, the anger. He was already blaming himself.

"What happened next?" I asked.

"We went to arrest Haus," she said. "Me and... a group of soldiers. Five-oh-first. He spotted the trap. He ran. We chased him." She swallowed. "I cornered him. So he jumped."

"Jumped?" Jax asked.

"Off the side of a building."

The room went silent. I tried to image if I'd have had the bravery to do something like that. I bet everyone else did too.

"What about Sheel Mafeen?" Jax asked. His tone was even and cold. It wasn't just the damaged throat. Something in his last fight with Vader had made him harder.

"They captured her. The five-oh-first. And Vader..." Ding's shoulders shook.

"She called us and told us about Prakith," Jax said.

"Vader made her do it." Ding swallowed again. "Then he killed her."

This time everyone exhaled. Altis said, "You mentioned Sarillion. What is that?"

"It's where Whiplash's leader is meeting with Jereveth Syne and Zozridor Slayke," Hett spoke up.

"Are they meeting *now*?"

Hett nodded grimly.

"I tried sending a signal to warn them," Sacha said. "No response, so I set a course."

"They might have fled already," I offered weakly.

"They might have been destroyed, or there might be a jamming field over the whole system. We have no idea."

"Which means we're jumping in blind."

"Looks like," Sacha exhaled.

"We were with Slayke and Syne at Bavinyar," Altis said. "I want to do anything we can to help them now."

I asked, "What *can* we do? We're just one little ship."

Nobody had an answer. Hett's good hand squeezed into a fist as he said, "We have to go there. We *have* to."

Something sad filled Altis' face as he put a hand on Hett's shoulder. He knew something we didn't.

Hanna Ding asked, "What about me?"

No one had an answer for that either. We all knew what the options were: trust her, tie her up and stick her in a closet, or throw her out an airlock.

None of us were bloody enough for the last option, but just then it did appeal to me. I couldn't tell what Jax and the others were

getting from her in the Force, but I didn't trust her. I couldn't say why; it was what my gut was telling me.

"I recommend Miss Ding be placed under observation," Kina Ha said. "Is there a safe, private room for her?"

So it was going to be option number two. I-Five said, "We have an empty storage chamber beneath the main hold."

"Put her there," Hett said. "*Keep* her there."

Ding didn't plead for a more lenient sentence. She had to know she wouldn't get one.

"Sacha, I-Five," Jax said, "Take care of it. Now."

"Gladly, boss," Sacha said darkly. She certainly didn't seem taken by our new friend.

I-Five and Sacha moved for her, but Ding stood up on her own accord. They took her firmly by the shoulders and led her down the maintenance corridor, toward the hatch in the floor that accessed the storage chamber.

As soon as she was gone, I asked, "Can we trust her?"

I expected a fast response. Instead I got a roomful of Jedi staring at each other, like nobody was sure who should go first.

"What?" I asked, "Isn't the Force supposed to tell you this stuff?"

"She's afraid," Scout said. "She's confused."

"Well, so am I. Can we *trust* her?"

"She's not telling the truth," Altis said.

"I sensed she was holding back something," Kina Ha agreed. "But as to what precisely... I am not sure."

"We'll have to interrogate her more," Hett said. "One-by-one if we have to, until we get a decision."

"And if we *can't* trust her," I asked, "What then?"

The only choice would be option number three. Every-one knew it. I didn't expect any of the Jedi to actually speak it aloud.

Then Hett said, "We'll have to kill her."

Everyone stared at him. Scout's mouth jawed open and closed several times until she said, "We can't do that! It's not right! She's just a padawan-"

"She *was* just a padawan," Hett scowled. "None of us are what we used to be any more. For all you know, *she* killed Haus and Mafeen."

He shifted his dark gaze to Jax. Something passed between them, I had no idea what, but neither of them could look away. It was like they were daring each other to make the first remark, to blow open whatever secret they'd come to share.

But when it was clear that wasn't going to happen, I said, "We need to get ready for Sarillion."

"We don't know what will happen there," Scout said.

"Then we get ready for anything."

I looked at Jax. I waited for him to respond, to break whatever connection held him and Hett transfixed.

"Jax," I said softly, "What should we do?"

He blinked, shook his head, and finally looked at me. "Like you said. Let's get ready for anything."

18

"For those of us who fought the Empire, there was a shared realization that lurked in the back of our minds. It was something hardly anyone dared to speak out loud because it was too awful to face. The simple fact was that we were fighting a losing battle against impossible odds. In opposing Palpatine we were setting ourselves on a path of pointless struggle and certain death. In the end, though, I think it was that unspoken realization that bound so many people together and made the Rebellion possible."

The enemy frigate's shields crumbled under a continuing hail of turbolaser fire from *Spearhead's* port batteries. A volley of concussion missiles tore through its engine compartment and ignited its power core. The frigate flared and was gone.

Jan Dodonna would have felt better above that, but *Freedom Song* and *Leveler* had planted themselves off *Spearhead's* starboard bow and were overwhelming the destroyer's defenses. *Starwind*, meanwhile, was exchanging a broadside volley with *Valediction* and neither ship seemed to have the advantage. The bulk of Slayke's main carrier, chewed up by *Starwind's* batteries, now drifted into Sarillion's rings to be chewed up further before falling into the planet, but destroying *Valediction* was the goal that superseded all others, and it didn't look like Captain Nahm was going to pull it off.

Grant watched the tactical holo with his lips pressed tightly together. Jerec hovered behind him, 'watching' the holo as well, though Dodonna had no idea how the blind Inquisitor was really experiencing the battle. He might have been savoring all that pain and death.

"We're running low on ships, Admiral," Dodonna said. "If we're going to move in, we should do it now."

"I don't believe *Spearhead* is going to last much longer," Jerec said.

He didn't need the Force to tell him that. The ship was getting overwhelmed, and if it went down, three heavy capital ships would be free to pound Captain Nahm's vessel into dust.

"At least pull back *Starwind*," he said. "She might be able to draw Syne out from the—"

Spearhead's marker flashed red and yellow. Dodonna turned to the viewport just in time to see her bow get torn to shreds by *Freedom Song* and *Leveler*. Her stern and command tower began to be pulled toward the planet, even as she desperately fired her engines in an attempt to escape.

"Pull *Starwind* back," Grant ordered.

Dodonna breathed a sigh of relief. *Valediction* didn't chase Nisihl-Nahm as his vessel pulled back to mid-orbit to join the three remaining capital ships.

Four destroyers, including an interdicator, should have been enough to take the enemy fleet, but Syne and Slayke had been fighting a ferocious battle, luring Grant's forces behind the veil of Sarillion's rings ship-by-ship and destroying.

"Enough of this," Grant breathed. "We're regrouping for a full attack."

It seemed to be the only option they had left. Dodonna asked, "Do you plan on bringing *Closed Fist* with us?"

"The interdicator stays," Grant said. "The three of us are going in beneath the rings." He tapped his fingers nervously on the edge of the tactical console, then added, "But not yet."

"Are we waiting for something?" Dodonna frowned. There weren't any reinforcements on the way from N'zoth, though if he called they could be at Sarillion in under six hours.

Without answering, Grant stalked over to the communications station. Dodonna watched him go.

"The Emperor won't be pleased if they escape," Jerec said. "With *any* of us."

Dodonna didn't even know what he was *doing* here. He didn't want his career to end with this fiasco.

"The Emperor is in a foul mood already," Jerec continued. "Grant's failure will not help."

"Already?" Dodonna frowned. "Can you... sense the Emperor's moods?"

Jerec didn't respond. Dodonna wasn't sure he wanted to know anyway.

* * *

Syne had no qualms about letting *Starwind* slip away. The brawl with the destroyer had damaged their port shields heavily, and they also needed to launch repair crews to collect the escape pods from *Fat Bastard* before they were pulled into the gas giant or cracked open by the stone and ice fragments in Sarillion's rings.

Leveler and *Freedom Song* moved closer to help. Syne walked to the communications station and placed a call to the other capital ship captains.

"We seem to be holding our own well," Avit Madrisk's shrunken blue holo-image said.

"Thanks to *your* surprise, Captain," Slayke grinned from *Freedom Song's* bridge. "You know, gent and lady, we just might pull this off after all."

"It's been very costly," Syne reminded them.

"Not as costly as it's been for Grant."

"How long until the next attack?" Madrisk asked.

"Not long, unless he's waiting for reinforcements. What do you think, Madam? Have we *finally* pissed Grant off enough to get him in here?"

"I sincerely hope so," Syne said. His remaining three star destroyers would make for an ugly fight, but she wanted to face him in battle more than anything. She was amazed the fight had drawn on this long and was even starting to hope she might live to see A'Sharad again.

But the thought of A'Sharad brought her down from the adrenaline-high of battle and reminded her of the one thing more important than revenge on Octavian Grant.

She excused herself from the conversation and stepped into a quiet alcove at the back of the bridge. She quickly placed a call to Sajin on her personal comlink.

"Madam, are you there?"

"I'm here, Sajin. Are you with Jadesei?"

"Yes. She's been wailing like an animal, but what can you expect, with the ship getting all knocked around."

She sounded breathless, scared. Syne knew the feeling. "Sajin, we have a lull right now, but I think Grant is going to attack again soon. Personally. I need you to be ready."

"Me?"

"I want you to be ready to take Jadesei and leave the ship."

There was a long pause. "Where can we go?"

"I don't know, but I'll designate a shuttle for you. Something that can hide in Sarillion's upper atmosphere if it has to."

"Are you sure we won't be safer on *Valediction*?"

"I'm not sure of anything right now, but I want you to be ready to protect my daughter."

"I'll do anything. You know that. But Jereveth... What about *you*?"

She looked back at her bridge, her loyal crew ready to sacrifice themselves, and wondered if they should mean as much to her as her child.

They didn't, and never would, but just as Jadesei was her daughter, she was Gregor Syne's.

"I have a duty here," she said. "But if the time comes, I'll do everything I can to be with you."

She clicked off the comlink and exhaled. She didn't want to die on this bridge. She would do anything she could to avoid it. But she knew she might not have much choice in the end.

Like father, like child. A'Sharad would understand that, wherever he was.

* * *

The moment *Laranth* dropped out of hyperspace, he knew they were in trouble. There were too many stars, and Sarillion was too far away.

A'Sharad Hett was in the co-pilot's seat next to Sacha. His mangled arm was still bound against his chest and the painkillers made his head swim with every sharp motion, but he still lunged forward against his crash webbing and tried to make out what was happening in the far distance, where Sarillion's broad rings spun on their diagonal axis around the flame-colored world.

"They must have an interdiction field up," Pavan said behind him. The cockpit was absolutely crammed with people: I-Five, Den, Altis, and Ash were all stuffed into the space behind Hett's chair.

"Checking scanners now," Sacha reported. "But I bet you're right."

"I'm trying to comm system," Hett said, though he could only do so much with one hand. "I'm getting nothing. We're still being jammed."

"What about main sensors?" Altis asked. "Can we find out what's happening at the planet?"

"Hold on, I'm getting something now." Sacha chewed her lip. "I'm reading capital ships. Big ones. Definitely a brawl going on out there."

"What ships?" Hett pressed.

"I'm getting one group with... an interdictor and three destroyers. One *Venator*-class, one vicstar, one of those new impstars."

"What *else*?"

"There's another group. It looks like they're pinned down in Sarillion's lower orbit. I'm getting an assault carrier-"

"Madrisk," Hett muttered under his breath.

"-some kind of Techo Union battleship-"

"Slayke."

"-and another destroyer, *Victory*-class."

"That's her!" he pounded the console with his good fist. "That's Syne!"

"Can we get there faster?" Jax asked.

"We're already at full sublight. We won't hit the planet's orbit for another hour," Sacha said.

"What'll we do when we *get* there?" Den asked.

Nobody had an answer for that, but it didn't matter.

Forward was the only direction they could go.

* * *

They crossed beneath the curve of Sarillion's rings in one straight line: *Empire Star* in the center, *Assail* on its port flank, *Starwind* on starboard.

The enemy fleet was there to meet them. *Valediction* hung slightly back, while *Leveler* and *Freedom Song* lurched forward along with the two remaining support ships: one gunship and one museum piece, a Corellian corvette painted in old Judicial scarlet.

Standing on *Empire Star*'s bridge between Dodonna and Jerec, Admiral Grant ordered, "*Starwind* and *Assail*, move forward on *Freedom Song*."

"That will put *Assail* in front of our firing axis," Dodonna reminded him.

"And block us from Syne's," Grant nodded.

The man seemed intent on drawing out a confrontation and Dodonna knew there was nothing he could do to stop him. He glanced at Jerec, wondering if the High Inquisitor's Force powers were making much-needed sense out of this brawl, but the bind

man's expression was both frustrated and distant, as though he was distracted by something much further away.

As ordered, the other two destroyers pressed forward. Dodonna watched the battle being through the forward viewport, now filled with the swelling gaseous swirls of Sarillion's outer atmosphere. *Assail* cut sharply across *Empire Star's* bow while *Starwind* began firing on *Freedom Song* with its forward batteries. *Leveler* adjusted heading and began to attack *Assail*, while the two smaller support ships dropped back to *Valediction*.

Turbolaser fire lit up Slayke's front and port-side shields. The ship stopped its charge and tried to pivot so it could deliver broadside volleys at both ships, while *Leveler* settled on *Assail's* tail. The destroyer was taking fire on both its fore and aft shields, which meant it wasn't going to last long.

Neither was Slayke. Even as *Freedom Song* attempted to deliver broadsides against two targets at once, its shields started to overload. *Starwind* fired off a volley of concussion missiles whose red trails slipped past the flickering particle shields and impacted. Geysers of flame tore open the hull. *Assail* shunted power to her aft shields to deflect *Leveler* while increasing forward fire.

Then *Freedom Song's* engine module exploded. Hands of fire seemed to race up the spine of the ship, consuming hull module after module, until they'd wrapped the bow in a dazzling spiral of flame. Dodonna's breath caught as he watched the blaze consume Slayke's flagship until there was only scorched metal left.

Cheers went off across the bridge, but *Empire Star's* captain shouted them down. Even as *Freedom Song's* black smoldering husk began to fall toward Sarillion, *Valediction* was surging forward.

"At last," Dodonna heard Grant snarl behind him. "At last!"

* * *

As Syne watched *Freedom Song* burn, she felt like all her hopes were burning with it.

She's thought, going to meet Grant's charge, that *Freedom Song*, *Valediction*, and *Leveler* could tackle each of Grant's three capital

ships one by one. She hadn't been expecting the sudden turn of the *Venator*-class destroyer and the two-to-one crushing of *Freedom Song*.

Now Slayke was dead. The last two ships he'd commanded, *Black Dancer* and *Scarlet Thranta*, charged on the *Venator* without being ordered. Madrisk was already pounding the ship's aft. Slayke's two little escort ships, a hungry for revenge as she was, began attacking its bridge.

"Guns," Syne ordered, "Open fire."

Valediction shuddered as her forward batteries unleashed wave after wave of green energy on the destroyer's starboard side. It shunted its shields to meet the barrage, but they were already straining under *Leveler*'s attack. A series of explosions tore through the hull, and *Black Dancer* landed a well-placed concussion missile barrage that impacted on the ship's dual command towers, tearing them open and spilling fire and debris into space.

The flaming destroyer's engines failed and it began to tumble toward the planet in *Freedom Song*'s wake. That brought a half-hearted cheer from Syne's crew, ended immediately when the other *Victory*-class destroyer began firing broadsides against their port shields.

"Pull forward!" Syne ordered. "After Grant! After him!"

It was two capital ships against two. *Valediction* and *Starwind* were the same class of ship and, statistically, even matches. Grant's *Empire Star* was twice as big and three times as well-armed as *Leveler* but it didn't matter.

She's fought this far against impossible odds, and Octavian Grant was in her sights.

Not even Yvolton was urging caution now.

As they pressed forward, surging past the dead destroyer, *Black Dancer* fell back to engage the other *Victory*-class. With their leader gone, Slayke's people seem to have lost all fear of death. The gunship unloaded her entire payload of missiles on the destroyer's forward shields, followed by a wave of laser blasts. The shields absorbed the projectiles but not the energy weapons, and plasma bursts tore through the ship's side and ignited the magazines of its

port weapon batteries. Twisted metal, flame, and unlucky crewmen gushed out into space even as the forward gun batteries kept firing. *Black Dancer's* shields finally collapsed, and the gunship vanished in a burst of white-hot light.

The crippled destroyer struggled to keep up. *Valediction*, *Leveler*, and brave little *Scarlet Thranta* pressed ahead toward the waiting gray diamond of Grant's flagship.

* * *

Ni-sil-Nahm's blue holo flickered over the communications console as he said, "Engines at seventy-five percent, General. We're falling out of firing range."

"Keep up the best you can," Dodonna told him. "We're going to need you. Ni-sihl."

"Can you hold out against Syne?" Even through the static he sounded weary.

"We'll do our best," Dodonna said. "Keep fighting, Captain, that's an order."

"Anything for you, General," Ni-sihl-Nahm said, and the holo flickered off.

Dodonna looked around the bridge. You could see the tension in everyone's faces as they watched Syne's two ships looming up ahead. If they were anything like Dodonna they were probably trying to understand how an easy rout had turned into a brutal fight to survive.

Grant was down by helm control, crouching low to give orders to the lieutenants in the crew pit. Then he stood up and moved over to another station with ease and languor, like they weren't about to grapple with his nemesis with odds against them. Dodonna was starting to wonder if the man hadn't simply gone mad.

As for Jerec, he was still standing by the tactical console, forehead wrinkled in consternation.

Dodonna walked over to the Inquisitor and said, "Can you do anything to help us, Lord Jerec? Anything at *all*?"

Jerec tilted his head to face him, to look at him with those sightless eyes. "There are Jedi here."

"With Syne? You said there *weren't*."

"They're out there!" Jerec stabbed a finger toward the back of the bridge.

"You mean they're somewhere else in the system?"

"Yes. And I think... they are just the ones I'm looking for."

Without further explanation, Jerec stalked, probably to order the launch of some fighter expedition. Grant, mean-while, was over at the comm station and didn't seem to care what Jerec was doing on his ship. Up ahead, *Valediction* and *Leveler* had passed out from beneath the veil of Sarillion's rings and were almost in firing range.

Dodonna was starting to think *he* was the one going mad.

Then the deck lurched as *Empire Star* began to pivot away from the planet. The viewport panned away from Syne's ships, from *Starwind*, from the swirling planet and its shimmering rings.

"Admiral, what are we *doing*?" Grant staggered back to the comm station.

"We're letting Syne chase us," Grant said. He almost sounded happy.

"Is the interdicator going to fight with us?"

Grant shook his head. "*Trust* me, General."

The man really had gone mad. If they'd charged forward, brought Syne to a halt and given Ni-sihl a chance to take her from behind, they might a chance, but the interdicator couldn't brawl as well as a vicstar, even a damaged one.

"Admiral," the tactical officer reported, "She's coming after us. All three ships."

"Very good. Comm, tell *Closed Fist* to drop her interdiction field."

"*What*?" Dodonna gaped. "We're *escaping*?"

Grant just looked at him and smiled.

* * *

"The drag field's gone!" Sacha bleated.

Hett lurched forward in his seat. "Can we jump to the planet?"

"I can try a micro-jump, I think."

"Why did they drop it?" Jax asked behind them. "Is Grant running?"

It seemed impossible, but Hett couldn't see any other option. By some miracle combination of luck and tactical brilliance, Syne had winnowed Grant's fleet down to two destroyers, one of them crippled and slow. Now both *Leveler* and *Valediction* stood ready to tackle his flagship head-on.

"Got it!" Sacha cried.

The stars in their viewport stretched long, turned the world white, then turned back to stars a half-second later. The fiery marble of Sarillion exploded in front of them, as did Grant's massive star destroyer.

When Hett tried to work the comm system again, Jax gasped.

He looked up just in time to see four more star destroyers wink into realspace: three Venators and one smaller, broader vessel with a bow split open like the mandibles of an insect. He'd only seen that kind of ship once before, at Bavinyar.

Then Sacha said, "Incoming fighters!"

* * *

The voice said crisp and clear over *Empire Star's* bridge loudspeaker: "This is Captain Griff of the star destroyer *Majesty*, reporting as ordered."

"Very good, Captain," Grant said loud enough for the whole deck to hear. "I'm glad you could make it."

"What are your orders, Admiral?"

"What do you think?" Grant smiled. "Destroy them all."

"With pleasure, sure."

As soon as the connection clicked off, Dodonna spun on Grant. "Who is that?"

"One of my officers from the Ryndellian sector fleet," Grant said.

"Why didn't you call him before?"

"I didn't *need* him before."

Dodonna's mind spun through all those dead ships, all those thousands of dead crewmen. "All of this... Just to draw out Syne..."

"She used her trick too soon, General. I kept mine for last."

* * *

In an instant, it was over.

Bitter certainty washed over Jereveth Syne and laid bare her mistake. They always said she was cold but she wasn't; she'd let white-hot anger, the need for revenge, overtake her better judgment.

Now four new star destroyers were rushing to overtake her, Grant's flagship swung to face her, and the final destroyer was limping up from behind, cutting off the only place she could run.

In that moment, as she stood on the bridge amidst the panicked crew, the wailing alarms, she knew that every-thing she had done had come to nothing.

And then she remembered what she should have never forgotten in the heat of anger.

"Sajin?" she barked into her comlink. "Are you there? *Sajin?*"

"I'm with Jadesei," she replied quickly. "What happened?"

"Get to the shuttle. *Now.*"

Sajin didn't ask questions, didn't hesitate. Syne could hear her daughter wailing as the other women took her out of her crib. It was probably the last sound she'd ever hear Jadesei make.

"What about you?" Sajin asked.

She wanted to sprint for the bridge as fast as she could, but she couldn't ask Sajin to wait.

"The interdiction field is down. Get the shuttle and *run*. Go to Dornean space. I'll find you if I can."

"I'll do it. And Jereveth-" Sajin's voice cracked. After all the years they'd shared there was too much to say.

"Thank you, Sajin. Thank you for everything."

Syne turned off the comlink. Then she turned to see Thi Xon Yimmon standing two meters away from her, staring at her. His

expression was strangely calm, even as the battle raged around them, even as death crept ever-closer.

"I have people I need to protect," Syne said defensively.

"If you didn't, you wouldn't be here," Yimmon said calmly. "None of us would."

"You're not afraid."

"Are you?"

Fear was one of those things her father had taught her to lock away so it couldn't mess with the rest of her. She'd gotten pretty good at it, but not perfect.

"Yes," she admitted. "I am."

"But you'll fight, even knowing the odds?"

"I always have."

He gave a soothing smile. "Then you're in good company."

The four new destroyers were charging in fast from the port side. They'd be within firing range of *Leveler* in minutes. Up ahead, *Empire Star* was turning to show her broadsides.

And *Scarlet Thranta* was shooting past *Valediction's* bow, right toward Grant's ship.

Syne hurried over to the comm station and told Wells, "Get me that ship! Now!"

"She's already hailing you, Madam. Audio only."

"To my comlink," she ordered and fished hers back out. "*Scarlet Thranta*, state your intent. Are you running?"

"Doesn't look like we'll make it," said the corvette's captain. Syne couldn't remember his name.

"State your intent!"

"This was Slayke's first command, back when he was a Judicial. We figure it deserves a send-off he'd be proud of."

The red glow of its thrust engines blazed in front of *Empire Star*. The destroyer was already unloading its batteries but the corvette was a small and nimble target.

"We'll slow him down for you, Madam! *Scarlet Thranta*, out!"

The line went dead. Syne stared ahead. Everyone did. The whole bridge watched in silence as *Scarlet Thranta* slammed right into *Empire Star's* forward shields. The force of impact tore through the

energy barrier and sheared the corvette to pieces. Debris shot like bullets and ripped holes through the destroyer's bow.

Cheers went up. Syne almost joined them, but Well's hand grabbed her forearm.

"Madam," he said, "A call from Madrisk."

"Put him on."

The captain appeared as a flickering holo above Wells' console. He snapped a salute and said, "Looks like they just gave you an opening, Madam."

An opening for revenge. An opening for escape. She had to take it either way. The confusion alone should be enough for Sajin and Jadesei to escape.

"We'll try to hold off the other destroyers," he said, and they both knew what it meant.

She said, "Die well, Avit."

He nodded. There wasn't anything else to say. The holo flickered off.

She turned to command the helm to fire all forward thrusters, but Yvolton was already on it. She looked over her shoulder and saw Thi Xon Yimmon, standing tall in the center of the bridge, an island of calm and even confidence. She understood how this man had gotten so many beings to follow him.

Just maybe, they would follow him still. She could hear the distant engines groan as *Valediction* shot forward.

* * *

If he'd had anything in his stomach, A'Sharad Hett would have thrown it up already.

Sacha was hurling *Laranth* into a mad series of twists and spirals to avoid the TIE fighters that had come roaring at them. Den was practically hugging the back of her pilot's chair and Jax gripped the back of Hett's with both hands.

Hett barely noticed any of it. He was leaning over the comm system, trying desperately to hail *Valediction*.

"Jereveth, Jereveth, are you there?" he shouted, "*Valediction*, respond!"

The ship rocked. Sacha swore and said. "That one got through our shields!"

"Did it damage any systems?" Jax asked.

"I don't know," she grimaced and jerked the control yoke. "I'm kinda too busy to check."

Behind them Altis muttered, "I can feel him. He knows we're here."

"Who?" bleated Den.

"Jerec. They said he was coming for us at Prakith..."

A pair of Y-wings from one of the rebel ships whipped past and picked off one of the TIEs. *Laranth* pulled a sharp turn, forcing the other TIE to slow. One of the Y-wings clipped its solar panel with its turret gun and sent the crippled fighter spiraling into deep space.

"We have to get closer!" Hett snapped.

"If we get closer we're going to pick up *more* fighters!" Den said.

"No! We need to get closer!" Hett pounded the comm system with his fist. "*Valediction? Valediction?*"

Suddenly a scratch voice said: "That you, sir?"

It was a voice he'd heard a million times, a clone's voice. "Wells? Is she there?"

"One sec-"

A wash of static drowned out Wells. Hett punched the console again, so hard his hand hurt, and told Sacha, "Just a little more!"

Suddenly a tiny blue light sprung up in front of him. He found himself staring at a flickering, distortion-marred image of a young woman with a stern pale face above an embroidered uniform collar and a pair of epaulets.

A sad smile softened that face and she said, "Hello, A'Sharad."

* * *

Red lights flashed and alarms wailed as damage reports bounced back and forth across the bridge. Jan Dodonna held tight onto the tactical console as the ship shuddered once more. Through

the forward viewport, he could see *Leveler* charge to meet Griff's ships. The hail of turbo-laser fire from all four vessels quickly overwhelmed it. *Leveler* was attempting a suicidal ram of the lead destroyer when its engines exploded and a fireball consumed the entire ship.

Nobody on the bridge cheered or even noticed.

"We lost the forward missile magazine!" someone shouted.

"More hull breaches!" Somebody else said. "Eighty percent of the atmospheric shields are holding."

"Seal off all compartments fore of the hangar!" The ship's captain ordered. "Engines, report!"

"Still functioning, sir."

Dodonna spun on Admiral Grant, who stood in the center of the bridge with his hands clenched at his sides, staring at the approaching white wedge of *Valediction*.

"Admiral," he said, "We have to fall back! Now!"

"Not again," Grant snarled. "Not *again*!"

He grabbed the admiral by one shoulder and shook him. "We can't defend like this! We have to pull back!"

Then someone from the comm station called, "Admiral! It's Captain Nahm!"

* * *

"*Jereveth!*" Hett jerked forward as far as his crash webbing would allow. "You have to get out! Now!"

"Grant is on that ship! I can take him!" she insisted.

Valediction was charging the big star destroyer, now smoldering from hangar to bow. The new destroyers were cutting in toward her flank but they slowed to maneuver around *Leveler's* fiery wreckage.

If Syne could break Grant's ship, they could escape into hyperspace. All of them.

And he knew how much she wanted to destroy Octavian Grant.

"A'Sharad!" she said. "Run! Go to Dor-" There was a surge of static, blurring her image and obscuring her words.

"No!" Hett shouted and punched the console yet again. "Come back!"

"-and Sajin!" Syne was saying. "Whatever happens to me, you have to-"

Another burst of static. He said, "Jereveth, listen to me! Don't stay on the bridge! Get to the escape pods, we'll pick you up!"

Her image resolved again. "Just hold on, A'Sharad, we'll be clear in a minute."

"What happened to Jadesei? *Where's our daughter?*"

"I sent-"

The connection broke again. Hett snarled at Sacha, "Take us in! Closer!"

"Lots of hot light out there," she grimaced. A storm of green turbolaser blasts that was starting between *Vale-diction* and Grant's ship.

"I don't care if we get burned! Take us closer!" He hit the comm system again.

"Look!" Jax stabbed a finger between them. Hett looked out the viewport and saw a second vicstar, surging up from behind *Valediction*.

* * *

Syne hung over the comm console, repeated A'Sharad's name, praying the signal would come back and his holo-image would flicker to life in front of her again.

Instead she felt Yvolton's hand press on her shoulder. She looked back and saw a grim face.

"They're coming up from behind us," he said. "The last destroyer."

She'd forgotten about it entirely. She looked across the bridge at the tactical display: one red wedge was almost upon theirs.

"Spread our shields out," she said. "Block their fire."

"Madam, they haven't opened guns."

Cold realization took her. Before she could say anything, a blue holo jumped to life above the console once more.

"Jereveth!" Hett's broken image said, "Get to an escape pod! Now!"

"Oh, A'Sharad," she breathed, "I am so, so sorry."

"Hurry!"

"I loved you so much." Her face felt right and her vision blurred. She felt cold water run down one cheek. "Take care of our daughter."

The bridge shook. The holo died. Someone cried, "They're coming in on our starboard side!"

"All guns fire!" Yvolton called.

It wouldn't do any good. Syne placed both hands on the shoulders of her comm officer, bent low, and told Wells, "Thank you for your service, Lieutenant."

Wells looked at her, blinked the dark eyes that shared by a million men but still his own, and said, "Thank you for the opportunity, Madam."

Syne straightened. The bridge shook again. She looked across the chaos to see Thi Xon Yimmon, immovable in the center of the bridge. She blinked her vision clear and his eyes met hers.

He didn't say anything, didn't even change his expression, but somehow he gave her strength.

She turned to the forward viewport and saw Grant's flagship sitting so close, so infuriatingly far away, and wondered what her father's last sight had been before he died.

* * *

Starwind's bow tore into *Valediction's* starboard side, bursting through shields and shearing through layers of durasteel. Their hulls scraped and tore into one another until *Starwind's* tip collided with the forward missile magazine in *Valediction's* bow. The chain of explosions tore through both ships, igniting more weapon caches, until the firestorm finally reached *Valediction's* main power core.

The resulting fireball swallowed both ships and flared so bright everyone on *Empire Star's* bridge covered their eyes and turned their heads.

Everyone except Vice Admiral Octavian Grant.

He stood with one hand pressed against the transparisteel of the forward viewport, squinting stubbornly into the inferno, savoring every flash of light and burst of flame and flailing chunk of twisted, blackened metal.

He felt like he had passed through a door and left the rest of his life behind him: All the plotting and tricks, all the tactical gambles, all the failures. They belonged to another man.

Staring at her pyre he realized that Gregor Syne's little waif had been the most capable enemy he'd ever faced.

He took his hand off the transparisteel, clacked his heels together, and snapped a salute. He held it for one second, two, three. Then, solemnly, he lowered his hand to his side.

She deserved that much, anyway.

It took forever for the fire of two star destroyers to burn out, but when it dimmed enough so that it no longer stung his eyes, he turned to see the rest of his bridge. General Dodonna was taking his hand away from his face, finally, and peering at the smoldering wreckage with abject horror. High Inquisitor Jerec, who hadn't needed to hide his face at all, wasn't even paying attention to the explosion. He was accosting a tactical lieutenant who looked incredibly confused, about some topic Grant neither knew nor cared to know.

He turned away from them all, back to face the burning ships, to savor the end of it all.

* * *

A'Sharad Hett screamed a horrible wordless wail. Jax and I-Five lurched forward to restrain him before his agonized flailing broke something in the cockpit, or worse, mangled his bad arm even more. Hett was a huge man and a Jedi Master besides, so I shrunk like the coward I am against the far wall behind Sacha's chair

Our pilot was already spinning us away from the planet and setting course for who-cared-where. As Jax and I-Five hooked arms around Hett's shoulder and pinned him to the chair, I asked her, "When do we leave the gravity well?"

She eyed her console. "Right about... Now!"

She reached for the level to fire the hyperdrive but froze. I snapped, "What's wrong?"

"Nav computer's kriffing down!" Sacha snarled. "When they winged us they must have messed up our systems!"

"Who *cares*? Micro-jump! Just get us out of here!"

"I *can't*, not here!" She waved a hand at the tightly-packed old stars of the Koornacht Cluster. She was right. A blind jump here was liable to get us fried instantly.

Beside us, Jax and I-Five had finally managed to subdue the raging Hett. The big man was pressed back in his chair, chest heaving for air, gleaming tear-trails running down between the black tattoo-lines on his face. I had no idea what kind of anguish he was going through then. I didn't even *know* he had a wife and child until a minute ago.

And right then, sorry to say, I didn't really care.

"I-Five," I said, "Can you fix the nav-comp?"

Five was still leaning over Hett with one arm hooked around his shoulder. When I asked the question he stared at me, just *stared*, like I was speaking a totally foreign language, until I remembered his astromech incarnation's explosive suicide run at Prakith.

Then Master Altis said, "I may be able to help."

I'd almost forgotten the old guy was there. He squeezed himself between Sacha and Hett's seats, stretched out his arm, and placed his hand on the console, right over Sacha's nav computer.

Then he closed his eyes.

I stared at him. So did Sacha and Jax and I-Five.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said.

Sacha glanced at her sensor console. "We've got a bunch of TIEs coming after us. If your magic trick's gonna work, old man, it's gotta work now!"

Altis didn't say anything, but I could see his brows scrunch together in concentration.

"Does that even *work*?" I-Five asked, half in disbelief and half in wonder. "How can you use the Force to talk to machines?"

We looked at Jax for an answer, but he looked as perplexed as we were.

Then something chimed on Sacha's console. She whooped and said, "Nav-comp's back online! Where you wanna go?"

"Anyplace *safe*," I told her.

Master Altis withdrew his hand from the console and stepped to the back of the cockpit. Jax and I-Five, they stared at him in awe, but me, I was looking straight ahead when the starlines jumped to infinity and flung us far, far away.

19

"Against all odds we'd survived, but there was no joy in it, no victory. After we fled Sarillion we found ourselves in a void. All of our friends and allies were dead. We had no home, no refuge, no direction or purpose. The weight of so much nothing felt overwhelming to me then. The Jedi, though, had been through all of that once already. After Sarillion I think I understood them better than ever before."

Once Sarillion was behind them, they had to pick up the pieces.

Laranth was a small ship, and the new arrivals made it feel suddenly cramped. The new Jedi gathered in the main hold to speak quietly. Scout was keeping guard outside the hatch to Hanna Ding's makeshift prison cell. Sacha had retreated to her cabin to check on Magash, and Jax decided to pay her a visit first.

The Zabrak woman lay face-up on the bottom bunk. Sacha, was perched on a stool next to her, had just changed her bacta bandages and was fetching a bottle of water. Magash was conscious but clearly weak.

Jax crouched next to her bed and touched her good shoulder; her severed one faced the bulkhead.

"Hey, Magash," he said, "You hear me?"

Without turning her head, she said, "I can."

"I want to thank you."

She blinked, but kept staring at the bunk above her. "Thank me for what?"

"For putting up one hell of a fight, what do you think?"

"I failed," she said. "I let my guard down and-"

"You didn't fail," Sacha interjected. "You took on two Inquisitors by yourself. That's a hell of a lot more than I could have done."

"I *failed*," Magash rasped. "A warrior does not-"

"You saved my life." Sacha jabbed a thumb against her chest. "If that's failure, well, I guess I don't mean a lot to you."

Magash closed her eyes. "I didn't mean it like that."

Jax said, "Magash, everyone on our team got in and out alive. *And* we got the prisoners. Yes, some of us got hurt bad, but we honestly came out of that better than I expected. *Especially* seeing as how the whole damn thing was a trap set by Vader."

Magash didn't argue. Her chest rose and fell slowly. She almost looked asleep, but Jax knew she wouldn't drift off like that. The Zabrak woman would cling to consciousness just for the sake of being stubborn.

"We need to get her to a hospital," Sacha said. "She needs blood and fluids, not to mention a new arm."

Magash's eyes popped open. "No."

"What do you mean, *no*?"

"I do *not* need a new arm."

"Magash," Jax said, "It won't be hard to fix you a new one. Prosthetics these days are-"

"*No*." She almost snarled. "I lost my arm because I failed. I won't cover it up by grafting on some droid appendage."

"What are you going to do instead?" Sacha asked. "Just learn to live with one arm?"

"Yes," Magash said firmly.

Sacha sighed and looked like she wanted to argue, but Jax steadied her with a hand on her shoulder. "We can talk about this later. Right now Magash just needs to rest."

"What about a hospital?"

Jax sighed. "Right now we're just hanging in space. There's not many places we can go in the Koornacht Cluster. We'll have to

figure out something else. Do you think Magash will be okay for a while?"

"I am recovering already," Magash said.

Jax just looked at Sacha. The woman looked hesitant, but nodded.

Jax rose to his feet. "Okay. I'll let you know when we get a game plan."

When he walked back to the hold he saw Ash Jarvee and Kina Ha, but no Djinn Altis. When Jax asked after the man, Ash simply pointed toward the cockpit.

He found Altis and I-Five inside. Five was in the pilot's seat, Altis in the co-pilot's. They'd been facing the bright starfield and seemed to have been talking quietly, but when Jax entered they immediately went silent.

"No need to stop on my account," he said.

I-Five looked back and said, "Ah, sorry. I didn't know who it was."

Jax leaned between them with an arm against each chair. "What were you talking about?"

I-Five looked hesitant. Altis said, "I was trying to determine what sort of marvel this man is."

Man, not droid. It took a lot of people a long time to start thinking that way about I-Five, but Altis had picked it up immediately. Jax liked him already.

"I-Five is special," Jax agreed. "Can you feel him in the Force?"

"I can," Altis nodded. "It's a unique sensation, but as strong as many non-Jedi sentients I've met."

"No Jedi powers for me then?" Five said. "What a pity."

Jax couldn't tell if he was actually disappointed or just being sarcastic. He asked, "Master Altis, I've never heard of anything like I-Five before. Droids don't have midi-chlorians. They should be able to touch the Force. But Five *has*. We both sense it."

"You're trying to wrap your mind around it," Altis smiled wryly.

"I haven't made much progress."

"You *have* been busy," I-Five chimed.

"Still," Jax told Altis, "I was wondering if you could help."

Altis sighed and stretched his long arms. "My little trick took you by surprise, didn't it?"

"What did you *do*?"

"I talked to the nav computer and convinced it to start working again."

"With the Force."

"That's right." He talked like it was as simple as picking up rocks.

"I've never heard of that. I mean, I knew some Jedi in the Temple who had a certain, say, mechanical aptitude, but never anyone who could actually *talk* to machines."

"There are many ways of using the Force they don't teach in the Temple." Altis smiled.

"I've heard that. You let your Jedi marry and have children."

"That's right." The smile faded. "Does that bother you?"

"No." Jax looked down at his boots. "I had... a lover. For a time."

"And she died?"

The man was too perceptive. "It was very hard for me."

"Perhaps you should talk to Master Hett. I think he needs any help he can get right now."

Talking with Hett was going to be difficult, and not just because he, too, had lost a lover. The man had questions about Darth Vader, and right now Jax Pavan was the only Jedi in the galaxy who knew the answer.

I-Five asked, "Where did you learn to interact with machines?"

"An old friend." Altis smiled softly. "She's actually much better at it than I am."

Jax noted the present tense. "Is she a Jedi Master?"

"Yes, but not one who hung around the Temple much. She, too, found it... constraining. I tried to pass her methods on to my students. Like any Force skill, some were better at it than others. There was one woman in particular who was better than anyone else. Her potential, I thought, was just extraordinary..." His voice went soft. "But she's gone now."

"I'm sorry," Jax said.

"There's been so much loss." Altis sighed. "It can be hard to keep going."

"Where *are* we going?" I-Five interjected. "I mean, this view is pretty nice, but we have hurt people. They need medical attention."

Jax looked to Altis. "I was wondering if you could help us with that, Master."

"Call me Djinn, please," he waved a hand.

"Scout said your people are scattered all over the galaxy. There must be a place where we can meet up with them and get Magash and Hett the attention they need."

"My people are always on the move. I don't even know where most of them *are*. It's safer that way. Still..." Altis looked thoughtful. "I know where *some* of them went... And I do know a place that can certainly handle our medical needs."

"Then let's go."

"I'll need to make a call first. Tell them we're coming."

"Of course."

A little smile came back to his face. "They are, in fact, hiding with that old friend I just mentioned. She was never part of my herd exactly, but we never lost touch. I sent some of my people to hide with her."

"Fantastic," Jax said. "Tell us where to go and we'll set course."

Altis took a deep breath and said, "Naboo."

Jax blinked. I-Five said, "Are you kriffing *kidding* me?"

"Not at all," said Altis. "I recommend we set course for Naboo right now."

"Naboo is *Palpatine's* homeworld," Jax reminded him.

"Palpatine is on Coruscant now. He hasn't been back to Naboo in years."

"But that place is full of New Order loyalists. It *has* to be."

"Oh, every planet has its zealots, but Naboo also has a culture that values youth, creativity, originality, and those things the Empire wants to stamp out. At the same time, it also has a love of tradition, and the New Order is many things, but *not* traditional either. Most importantly, Thracia has powerful allies protecting her on Naboo."

"What kind of allies?"

"Queen Apailana herself."

"Oh." Jax couldn't think of anything to say.

I-Five made a throat-clearing noise and said, "Well, let's set course for Naboo, then."

"And I'll make a call." Altis turned to the communications console. "Give just me a moment to recall Thracia's encryption key. I'm sure I haven't forgotten it..."

Jax said, "By the way, Master-"

"Djinn," he said.

"Yes, sorry. But at Sarillion you said you could feel whoever was coming after us."

Altis' shoulders slumped. "Yes. I could. I don't suppose you ever met Master Jerec. He left the Republic before the Clone Wars even started."

"He was a Jedi."

"Was, yes. He's Palpatine's man now. But he spent a short time on *Chu'unthor* once."

"Another unconventional Jedi?" I-Five asked.

"Quite." Altis' face darkened at the memory. "He didn't believe in Master Yoda's rules against attachment, which I took for a good sign. Then I realized he didn't believe in a lot of other rules a Jedi should. He didn't stay with us long."

"Did you warn the Temple about him?" Jax asked.

"Believe it or not, I did. I don't know if they took me seriously. This was right before Jerec left for the Unknown Regions, so they probably couldn't have done anything if they wanted to."

"And now he's after us, in addition to Vader" I-Five crossed his arms over his chest. "This keeps getting better and better."

"Don't worry, Thracia can keep us safe," Altis said, but there was doubt in his eyes.

* * *

Scout sat directly on top of the hatch. Hanna hadn't tried to push it open and crawl out of the storage room where they'd locked

her. Scout could feel her presence beneath, closed-off but leaking confusion and anger, and that meant Hanna could feel hers too, but neither girl said a thing.

She didn't know long she'd been sitting there when Kina Ha stepped into the hallway. The Kaminoan was too tall for *Laranth* and had to walk the ship with her long neck perpetually bent down. When she got to the hatch she lowered herself to sit cross-legged and could finally stretch her neck straight.

"You've been here for a while," Kina Ha said softly.

Scout nodded. She didn't think Hanna would be able to hear them if they kept their voices down but she wasn't entirely sure.

"You need food," the Kaminoan said. "Liquids. Sleep."

"All of the above," Scout admitted, but she didn't stand.

"I will watch over her while you're gone."

"Thanks... but I'd rather stay here."

"You feel responsible for bringing her aboard."

"Pretty much," Scout admitted. "You probably didn't need the Force to tell you that."

"There are a number of Jedi here who can watch her until we reach our destination."

"Do we have one?"

Kina Ha lowered her voice slightly. "We are going to Naboo."

The name meant two things. First, it was Palpatine's homeworld. Second, it was a place where some of the Altisian Jedi had scattered after Bavinyar. She'd never gotten a chance to know that group well, as they'd left right after she'd joined Altis.

"Djinn has a friend there, doesn't he?"

"Thracia Cho Leem," Kina Ha nodded.

"I've heard of her," Scout frowned. "Didn't she leave the Jedi Order?"

"Thracia was always an independent thinker."

"Like Djinn then." Scout smiled a little. "It sounds like you know her."

"I remember her fondly."

"You like 'independent' Jedi, don't you?"

"When you've lived as long as I have, Scout, every other kind gets a little boring."

"It seems like those are the only ones left. Jax Pavan feels like the most straight-and-narrow Jedi I've met since Order Sixty-Six." She thought of Arligan Zey and added, "The only one still left, anyway."

"Djinn feels the Order brought doom on itself, that it was too rigid and ascetic, that it cut itself off from the true nature of the Force and enslaved itself to a corrupt government."

"I know. I've heard all that before."

Kina Ha didn't ask if she agreed. Scout was glad, because she still didn't know.

"Are you sure you don't want a break from guard duty, Scout?"

"Not right now."

"Would you like to talk to the prisoner?"

Scout blinked. "I thought someone else was planning on questioning her."

"No one else seems to be lined up for the job."

"Do *you* want to question her? I mean, if anyone can find out if she's telling the truth it's you, right? Can't you do one of those mind-meld things, like at Bavinyar?"

"Only if the other person wills it, and I don't think she would. But you were her friend, correct?"

Friend was hardly the word Scout would use. For most of her time as a padawan, Hanna had been a haughty face, a disdainful sneer. Scout would have called her a rival but Hanna had always been much better than her at pretty much every lesson the masters put them through.

"We were in the Temple together," Scout admitted. "I thought she'd been killed like the other padawans. I could almost, well, forget all our differences when I thought she was dead. But she's been helping *Vader*. She's helped him *kill* people, maybe even Jedi."

"She does seem to be hiding something."

"I know. What do you think it is?"

Kina Ha considered, but in the end she simply said, "Guesses are dangerous right now. We need certainty."

Scout sighed. "Then someone has to find out."

"Yes."

"I guess that someone has to be me."

"You don't *have* to do anything, Scout."

"Yes I do. That's why I've been sitting here. I just didn't want to admit it." Scout scooted off the hatch and grabbed its handle. "You'll help if I'm in trouble, right?"

"That's why I'm here," Kina Ha said.

Scout had no doubt the thousand-year-old Jedi could handle whatever Force tricks Hanna had learned from Vader. Right now there was no one else, not even Altis or Ash, she wanted watching her back.

Scout unlocked the hatch and dropped into the dark.

It wasn't far to fall, and it wasn't all dark either. One glowlamp shone in the opposite corner of the small chamber. As Kina Ha closed the hatch over her head, she spotted Hanna Ding sitting next to the lamp with her legs pressed against her chest and her head on her knees.

"Hanna," she said, "It's me. Scout."

"I know," the girl muttered into her lap.

Scout took two steps closer, which was enough to put her just outside the reach of a kicked-out leg. She crouched down and said, "Hanna, we need to talk."

The Arkanian girl lifted her head. Scout couldn't read much from her pale eyes but she felt her suspicion in the Force.

"What do you want from me?" Hanna asked.

"I don't want anything from you."

"Everyone wants something."

"That may be how it is in the Empire. But that's not how it is with Jedi. Are you a Jedi, Hanna?"

"I never was. And neither were you."

That prodded an old wound, maybe intentionally. To Scout's surprise, it didn't really hurt.

Over the past two years the constant fight to survive had burned away a lot of her old doubts. She might never be a great wise

Master like Altis or Kina Ha, but she'd come to understand that a Jedi was less something you *were* than something you *did*.

"Do you *want* to be a Jedi again, Hanna? Because that's what really matters."

"Nothing I want matters."

Scout licked dry lips and said, "You're wrong. It's the only thing that does. Master Yoda once told me that the universe was this dark, cold, awful place, and as Jedi we all have one choice to make. We can be dark and cold and awful or we can be a little candle holding back the night. We just have to chose."

Hanna's eyes narrowed. "What happened to you, Scout? You used to be a lot more... timid."

"You know what happened. It happened to you too."

"No. What happened to me was different. Don't pretend you understand what it's like in there, training with those street rats and thugs in the Inquisitorius. Most of them would never have been let into the Temple. Vader and Palpatine, they're just grabbing anyone Force-sensitives and making them into glorified cannon fodder. They make you do awful things, *terrible* things, just to survive."

Hanna's voice wavered. Scout knew they were getting to the crux of it. "What else did they make you do, Hanna?"

"I told you. They made me help hunt down the Whiplash leaders."

"You said you chased down Pol Haus."

"That's right." Hanna's barrier seemed to get higher, like she was trying to hide something from herself as well as Scout.

"What happened to Pol Haus, Hanna?"

She didn't answer. Those pale eyes were staring into nothing.

"What happened?" Scout tried to send warm feelings to her, encouraging trust.

Hanna's whole body trembled and she said, "I chased him. I chased him all the way to this catwalk. We had him cornered. So he just jumped."

She'd already said that. She'd told it to people who had known and trusted Haus, who grieved his loss. She was still hiding something. "What happened then?"

"I grabbed him. With the Force, I grabbed him, and I started pulling him up." Her pale eyes squeezed shut. "He took out a gun and shot himself in the head."

She lowered his forehead to her knees again. She was still breathing deep; Scout could feel the pain of vivid memory emanating off of her through the Force.

And yet, somehow, Scout knew there was more.

Scout asked, "What happened after that, Hanna?"

When she didn't reply, Scout said, "You captured someone too. Sheel Mafeen, wasn't it? What happened to her?"

The walls were crumbling inside Hanna; the pain was coming through. Memory was hurting Hanna and it would hurt Scout too, but she had to get to the truth.

"Hanna," she pressed, "What happened to Sheel Mafeen?"

"I killed her," Hanna croaked. "Vader tore her mind open. He learned everything and he made her call Pavan and pull him into the trap. Then he made me kill her. I reached out with the Force and crushed her throat."

Hanna didn't speak and didn't pick her head up. Her shoulders trembled but Scout couldn't hear her crying. All she could feel through the Force was a flood of regret.

When it became clear there was nothing else Hanna could say, Scout rose to her feet, reached up, and rapped her knuckles on the bottom of the hatch door.

Kina Ha opened the hatch. Scout jumped out.

Once she was out, Kina Ha closed and locked the hatch. As Scout watched the elegant Kaminoan she remembered the first time they'd met: by chance, in the lower halls of the Jedi Temple, during the Order's last awful night.

It seemed to Scout then that only chance had saved her from Hanna Ding's fate.

When the hatch was locked, Kina Ha turned the bottomless black of her eyes on Scout, expectant.

"Now we know," Scout said.

Laranth was a small ship and there were not many places where a man could be alone with his grief. For A'Sharad Hett, that place was Jax Pavan's personal quarters.

He sat on the floor for a long time, back against the wall, staring at opposite bulkhead, feeling nothing. Images ran through his head: the bright fiery death of *Valediction*, the static-marred holo of Syne in her dress uniform, the way Jadesei's face scrunched when she cried and the way Jereveth's relaxed when she lay down to sleep beside him; she'd always seemed so small and fragile when asleep, so different from her waking self.

And, again and again, he heard her last words to him before the static shattered their transmission: "I loved you so much."

But in the end all those things were gone, and he was stranded in a place with no past and no future. He found himself drawn toward memories older than Jadesei, than Syne, than ever the Jedi. He thought of the hot twin suns of Tatooine, and the way he'd watch them burn the dunes. He remembered his father, always brave, always novel, always with him. Life had been simpler then.

Gradually, he came to stare at the small potted tree sitting in an alcove near Pavan's bed. It was a gnarled, ugly little thing, but somehow he sensed that Pavan treated it with great reverence.

He was still staring at that tree when he heard a chime at the door. He waited, and it chimed again. Dimly, without really trying, he could sense Pavan on the other side.

"Enter," he said at last.

The door opened. Jax Pavan stepped inside and it closed behind him. He stepped into the center of his room and looked down at Hett.

Pavan was trying to think of some way to start a conversation. Hett saved him the trouble.

"Do you know where we're going?" he asked.

"We've set a course."

"Where?"

Pavan took a breath and lowered himself cross-legged in front of Hett, blocking his view of the tree. "We've set course for Naboo."

"Palpatine's homeworld?"

"Master Altis has friends there. He guarantees it's safe."

Hett found that he didn't care, not really. They would get to Naboo, and then what? Stay or scatter, hide or run, it didn't matter. There was only one fate that awaited them all, and had been ever since Order 66. Syne had been a way to deny the inevitable; that was all.

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you like," Pavan said. He was tentatively edging toward the topic of Syne's death. To his credit, he didn't say he was sorry.

Because he felt he had to say something, Hett muttered, "Thank you."

"If you want to talk... well, I've been through what you're going through right now. Not all of it, but a lot of it, and if you want to talk, I'm here."

Hett stared at him and didn't speak.

Pavan blew out breath. "I justed to make sure you knew that. After Laranth died... I ended up in dark places. I think the only thing that pulled me back was my friends, I-Five and Den and the rest. I thought I was alone but I wasn't. Neither are you."

Pavan straightened his legs and started to stand. He was halfway erect when Hett asked, "Who is Darth Vader?"

Pavan froze for a tiny second. Then he sat back down. He clasped his hands in front of him, twining fingers.

"You know who he is," Hett pressed. "He knows both of us. He was a Jedi, wasn't he?"

Pavan looked at his hands, nodded.

"Who?"

Pavan's mouth cracked open. He licked dry lips, took a breath, and said, "Anakin Skywalker."

And for the second time in a day, A'Sharad Hett's world fell down.

It all made sense. Hett had come to know Skywalker well during the Clone Wars. Anakin had even revealed things to him that he'd told no one else. At Aargonar, he'd told a man in a wrapped Tusken face-mask that his mother had been kidnapped,

tortured, and killed by a tribe of Sand People. He'd confessed to slaughtering the entire tribe in revenge, including women and children.

That was why A'Sharad Hett had finally removed the mask he'd worn since he was a child.

In the ensuing months, Anakin had become something like Hett's unofficial padawan while Master Kenobi was missing in action. The young man had been at once brilliant and volatile, prone to anger and violence but also capable of great compassion and sudden wisdom.

Kenobi had probably overlooked the darkness in Anakin because he was a friend, a brother almost. Hett had over-looked it too, even the slaughter of the Tuskens, because they were both boys from Tatooine who had lost their parents to violence. In time, Hett had learned to subdue the desire for revenge against his father's killer and tame the anger inside himself.

Anakin had done no such thing.

The enormity of it staggered Hett and broke through the emptiness that had enveloped him since Syne's death. He could have told the Jedi Council about what Anakin did after his mother's death. He *should* have. But instead he'd seen himself in that troubled young man and he'd granted Anakin mercy and a second chance.

Anakin had taken that second chance and become Darth Vader.

Words rattled out of Hett's throat: "All of it..."

Pavan frowned. "All of what?"

"Everything that happened... Everything he did... The slaughter at the Temple, the purge..."

The creation of the Empire itself.

His eyes flicked to Pavan's. "It's my fault. All of it."

Pavan shook his head. "Whatever Anakin did was *his* choice. You can't-"

"*All of it!*" Hett almost shouted. "I *knew* what Anakin was! He told me about what he'd done, the darkness inside of him, and I looked the other way because I..."

Because that troubled young man from Tatooine had reminded him so much of himself.

"I could have saved the Jedi order, the Republic, *all* of it," he croaked. "If I'd only just..."

"Just *what*?"

"I should have killed him." Conviction came, iron-strong. Pavan stared in confusion and horror. "I should have killed him on Aargonar, right when he told me. I should have killed him but I didn't and now *everyone*."

Something slapped across his face like a flat hand. Hett blinked. Pavan was still sitting there, two meters away.

"Everyone knew Anakin had problems, *everyone*. Not even Yoda or Kenobi could stop him from turning dark. You couldn't have done anything."

Pavan didn't understand at all. After all he'd been through the past two years, battling Darth Vader, loving and losing, he was still the *old* kind of Jedi, like Yoda and Kenobi. The kind that had failed. The kind that had gone extinct.

As he stared at Jax Pavan, A'Sharad Hett found the answer to the question he'd been afraid to ask ever since Order 66.

He was no longer a Jedi. He was something different. Syne's death had left him stranded in a void, but Pavan's revelation had delivered new purpose.

"I'm going to kill Anakin Skywalker," he said. "Late is better than never."

Pavan blinked, stared.

And then something else came to Hett, a memory, a vision: One man floating in space, his face set in a scowl so like that of his ancestor. For so long he'd wondered why the Force had sent him that vision. Now, at last, it all made sense.

"I have to rid this galaxy of Skywalkers," he said. "*All* of them."

INTERLUDE: A Candle in the Dark

The story ended suddenly. The man felt like he'd tumbled out of a dream. While he'd listened, everything the Sullustan described had seemed so vivid it was like he was seeing it himself: the eager gleam in Sacha Swiftbird's eye, the fierce lines on A'Sharad Hett's face, the dark hallways of the prison ship and the great inferno over Sarillion.

Then the room fell into silence and he was dropped right into his chair, staring across the table at the old, tired Sullustan.

"Is that it?" he said. "That can't be it."

"No," the Sullustan admitted. "There's a little more to tell."

"I want to hear it."

The Sullustan regarded him wordlessly for a moment, then asked, "Why?"

The man blinked. He didn't know why. He didn't even know what he was *doing* here.

He'd been minding his own business in the mid-levels when a couple police deputies came up to him, flashed their badges, and told him he was wanted for questioning. He'd had no choice but to drop into their speeder and ride with them all the way to the station. The sun had been going down as they arrived and the sky over Galactic City had run a brilliant spectrum of blue to violet to smoldering red-gold.

He had no idea how much time had passed. It might even be daylight again, though something told him they were still in the middle of a long night.

The Sullustan's question hung between them. He was forced to admit, "I don't know why. I just do."

"Does that seem strange to you?"

"Of course it does. But... I *need* to know."

"Need to know what?"

"What happened to everyone." To Jax Pavan. He was physically aching with that need.

The Sullustan regarded him again, then sighed. "We've been at this for a while. Aren't you getting tired?"

"I'm not," he said, even though he should have been.

"Hungry?"

"Not really." That was a lie. He didn't want to stop.

"Well I'm both." The Sullustan pushed the chair back and rose to his feet. "I need a break."

"A break? For how long?"

"Don't worry. I want to finish this as much as you do. Stay here. I'll have someone bring you water."

The Sullustan picked up his cane and hobbled out. The door closed shut behind him. The man remembered what he'd almost forgotten as he listened the Sullustan's tale: he was locked in a police interrogation room in the middle of the night and nobody had bothered to tell him why.

In a normal situation he'd be pounding at the door and demanding to speak with his attorney. Now, he just wanted the Sullustan to come back and finish.

He felt like the story was already starting to dissolve like a dream on waking. Not the facts, laid clear through the Sullustan's words, but the *images*. He could no longer remember the shape of Sacha's face or the stern, determined look that never left Magash's eyes.

He tried to see the face of Jax Pavan in his mind's eye, but he got nothing at all. Even when he'd been lost in the dream, he hadn't been able to see it.

The door opened. The man stiffened in his chair as a woman stepped into the room. She was a little on the short side and had recently hit middle age, though she still moved smoothly and when she smiled her face seemed fresh and young.

She placed a small tray in front of the man containing a bowl of soup and a small cup of water.

"I figured you'd need a little something," she said.

The soup smelled good too good to refuse. "Thank you very much," he said.

He took the spoon and sipped up some of the steaming liquid. The woman didn't move. She was still standing at the side of the table, looking down at him.

He swallowed the soup and said, "Can I do something for you?"

The woman blinked, then shook her head. "I just wanted to make sure you're all right."

"Oh, I'm all right. Confused as all hell and, now that you've put food in front of me, pretty hungry and tired. But I'm all right."

Instead of leaving, the woman sat down in the chair the Sullustan had vacated. He noticed that, unlike his first visitor, she wore the white uniform and badge of the Galactic City's emergency medical services. He squinted at the insignia on her breast.

"This isn't your district," he said.

"I know."

"And you're a medic, not a cop."

"I'm taking care of your health. That falls under my job description."

She was correct, more or less, but that still didn't explain what she was doing here, or what *he* was doing here, but somehow he knew they were connected.

He swallowed a little more soup and asked, "The guy I've been talking to, Den Dhur, is he a detective?"

"Why do you think that?"

"He's in plainclothes. That's what I first thought when he came in. But then he started talking about something that happened thirty years ago. Talked on and on and on."

"Den Dhur isn't a police officer. But you can consider him an... associate."

"Of the police, or of you?"

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I work as a private investigator. I like to think that makes me good at reading people."

"Den is a friend," the woman admitted.

He leaned forward and looked at that face. Somehow it, too, seemed familiar, though he was certain he'd never seen it before.

"How long have you know him?" he asked.

"It's been on and off," she admitted. "We've all lived through... uncertain times."

It was hard to argue with that one. Still, the dream was fading and his old investigative instinct was kicking in. He opened his mouth to ask another question when the door opened again.

The Sullustan stopped for a moment in the doorway, the hobbled forward and let the door lock shut behind him.

"Enjoying your meal?" he asked the man.

"It's good soup."

"I'm glad." He shifted his attention to the woman but didn't say anything.

The man lowered his head to sip more soup but kept his eye on them. He thought he saw the woman shake her head slightly.

He picked up the bowl, slurped down the rest of the soup, and put it back on the tray. He leaned back in his chair, spread his arms wide, and said, "I'm ready to finish this when you are."

"You want to hear the rest that badly?" asked the woman.

He did, but he felt obligated to throw in something snarky. "What I want is to find out why you people hauled me off the street for a history lesson. This ending had better be good, otherwise you'll be hearing from my lawyer."

To his surprise, the Sullustan's wide face creased in a smile. The woman got out of her chair and let him take her place. After he set his cane down and lowered himself into the seat, the Sullustan looked at her and said, "You can stay or go."

"I think I'll stay."

"That's fine. Do you want to get a chair?"

"No, this is fine," the woman said, and edged her backside onto the table. She sat on the corner next to the Sullustan with her body angled to give her a view of the other two beings in the room.

The Sullustan gave another of his heavy sighs and clasped his pudgy hands on the tabletop. He said, "We thought Naboo was going to be a refuge, or at least we hoped it. I've said that nothing we did ever went according to plan, and I was bracing myself for something to go wrong on Naboo. Plenty *did* go wrong, horribly awfully wrong, but there wasn't just tragedy waiting for us on Naboo. There was also revelation..."

PART III: Naboo

Falling Home

20

"Sometimes it felt like my life had been a constant ride on an out-of-control maglev ever since I met Jax Pavan. There was always someone to help or some thing that needed doing and probably involved risking our lives in the process. Other times I felt like my life had been like that since I'd met I-Five. After Sarillion, though, it felt like the maglev had come to a screeching halt. There was no place we needed to be and nobody who needed us. It almost felt like freedom."

A low winter sun cast long shadows in the streets of Theed. Cold wind cut through the streets and stung the faces of people walking with their heads bent low, but when they stepped into the city's broad plazas or open intersections, they were immediately warmed by the crisp morning light.

Sola Naberrié paused for a moment as she crossed one of the pedestrian bridges arcing over a branch of the Solleu River. She picked her head up, felt the warm sun on her face, and looked around. Queen Yram's Needle stabbed up to her right and the concert hall's broad dome swelled high on her left. Both rose above the roofs of Theed's other buildings and gleamed in the sun.

The sight made her feel a little better. She lowered her head and crossed the bridge. It took her another ten minutes to reach her destination; Theed was an old city, stubbornly resistant to what the rest of the galaxy called modernity and near-fanatical in its the

preservation of its elegant sandstone buildings. Some people called that provincialism, but Sola could not have called any other city home.

Once Sola passed the art museum, she crossed a broad open lane where people moved about in the sun. She picked her head up to see the building ahead of her. A squat rectangular structure framed by pillars and topped with a green-shingles roof, it managed to create an austere air while also blending in with the nearby buildings. Placed next to the Triumphal Arch and facing the long promenade that led to the Queen's palace, it was one of the very few buildings in Theed erected in the past century and the only one in the past few years. Normally the preservationists did everything they could to block new construction, but this building had received no objections at all.

It was a mausoleum to honor Sola's sister, Senator and Queen Padmé Amidala.

Solo climbed up the row of marble steps to the mausoleum's entrance. She nodded at the guards in blue-and-red uniforms. They recognized her instantly and let her pass.

Padmé lay encased in a stone coffin. Morning light spilled through the stained-glass window containing her image, beautifully dressed in a sky-blue gown. The window cast shades of blue and violet and red and orange across coffin, the walls, the slick gray-tile floor.

Sola did what she always did when she visited her little sister. She walked slowly around the coffin one time, counter-clockwise, her fingers lightly trailing along its smooth marble lid. Every footstep clapped and echoed in the chamber's sepulchral silence. In the beginning she'd whispered words to the sister that had been younger than her but often seemed much older. Sometimes she'd told Padmé the news about her daughters, Pooja and Ryoo. Other times she'd asked for advice, knowing she wouldn't get it. That morning Sola simply walked her slow loop in silence and savored being alone with her sister.

They said Padmé had been murdered by Jedi. Sola had never believed that. Neither had Queen Apailana. Padmé had been one of

the Order's greatest supporters and, Sola knew, she had been very close to one young Jedi Knight in particular.

Close enough to have become pregnant with his child. Padmé hadn't lived to tell her family who the child's father was, but Sola knew. She'd never seen Padmé show interest in anyone else after she brought Anakin to their family's estate in the country, just before the Clone Wars began.

She hoped, by some magic of the Force, Padmé and Anakin were happy together in death.

When she'd completed her ritual, Sola Naberrié left her sister behind and walked across the bright sunlit plaza toward the high shining domes of the Royal Palace.

The guards knew her here, too. She passed through three separate layers of security without issue, after which a smooth-faced young lieutenant led her up the grand stair-well and down the high-ceilinged marble hallways to the personal meeting room of Queen Aipailana.

The guard ushered her in without following. The first thing Sola saw was Aipailana herself, sitting behind her marble desk. Her black hair was pulled back from a face coated with white powder and artfully placed flecks of red and black, while white-and-gold robes fell in layers off her shoulders. Sola knew from her sister's term as queen that Naboo's young monarchs were expected to mask themselves with regal gaudiness for all but the most personal meetings.

After she'd received the Queen's summons the previous night, Sola had been hoping that this would be one of those rare informal talks, but that clearly wasn't going to be the case.

Chairs formed an arc facing the Queen's desk and only one was unclaimed. As she stepped forward to take it, Sola quickly took in the others in the room. She saw Sio Bibble, advisor to her sister and three Queens thereafter, squat and white-haired but still energetic. On Aipailana's opposite side was Raiella Maran. The Queen's security chief, a tall blonde woman, sat ramrod-straight in the chair. When she saw Sola approaching she gave only the slightest nod.

The Queen's third guest was a wrinkled, white-haired old woman in a plain tan tunic. She was so small her feet barely touched the marble floor.

As Sola sat down beside her, Jedi Master Thracia Cho Leem favored her with a generous smile. "I'm glad you could make it, dear."

"As are we all," the Queen said. Like Padmé, the teenage girl had learned to project both her voice and authority without moving from her seat. "Now that every-one is here, we can begin."

The very fact that Thracia was present told Sola it was Jedi business. The old woman and her collection of fugitive Knights spent most of their time in the secret tunnels beneath the Palace. Sometimes they ventured up to the surface and walked the streets of Theed with normal citizens, but only rarely. Sola knew it must be a dark and miserable existence for them, but hiding had seemed the only way to protect both the Jedi and the Queen from the Empire's wrath.

Sure enough, Apailana said, "Master Cho Leem, I'd like you to explain to everyone what you told me last night."

The old woman nodded. "I've just received a secret communication from a very close friends of mine, Djinn Altis."

Sola recognized the name. "Your Jedi are his followers."

"That's right. Djinn led a certain... splinter group that kept its distance from the Jedi Council, which is why so many of them survived."

Splinter group was as good a way to put it as any. When Sola had learned that the Altisian Jedi were allowed to marry and make families, she'd immediately thought of Padmé and that passionate, conflicted young man she'd brought home with her. Maybe, if they'd been part of Altis' sect or if the Jedi Council had followed Altis' rules, her sister and Skywalker both would be alive and happy.

But the galaxy was full of what-ifs. Most of them you just had to stop yourself from thinking about.

"Is Altis coming here?" Sola asked.

"That's right. He's on ship with several other Jedi."

"When will they arrive?" Raiella asked stiffly. The security chief had no problem with Jedi- otherwise she wouldn't be at this meeting- but she'd never liked big surprises.

"They're set to arrive tomorrow morning, just before dawn."

Sola could see the other woman relax. "I'll make arrangements to receive them in the main hangar. Privately."

Sio Bibble shifted in his seat and asked Thracia, "How long does Altis intend to stay here?"

"I'm not sure. It may be some time. I'm told two of his people will need medical attention."

"I'll gather trustworthy medical staff," Bibble said.

"Thank you, Counselor," the Queen said. "Chief Maran, make sure you can do the same for your people."

"Of course." Raiella seemed to bristle at the suggestion of anything else.

"Can you tell us anything else about these Jedi?" Sola asked Thracia.

"I didn't talk to Djinn for long, but it seems like he just escaped an Imperial prison ship."

The room tensed. Sio Bibble said, "Your Majesty, we're going to have to keep these Jedi well-hidden."

"Then you'd best make preparations, Counselor. And you, Chief Maran."

"I'd like to get started now," Raiella said.

"Of course. Dismissed."

Bibble and Raiella both rose, bowed, and walked out of the queen's chambers as quickly as they could while still looking dignified.

Thracia sighed and sunk a little in her chair. "I'm sorry to be a burden on you, Your Majesty, but Djinn needs all the help he can get."

"We'll do everything we can for the Jedi," Apailana said. "You know that, Master Cho Leem."

"You're putting yourself at risk, Your Majesty."

"We're doing the right thing."

In a way, Sola had to admire the queen's simple courage. She seemed so much like Padmé at the same age, all strength and ideals. After corrupt old King Veruna, the Naboo had fallen back on their custom of electing young women as rulers. The reverence of both archaic tradition and youthful conviction was strange to most off-worlders, but Sola had never seen a contradiction. In both cases, the Naboo were trying to preserve an ideal.

"There aren't many beings in the galaxy willing to 'do the right thing' any more," Thracia said as she pushed herself out of her chair. "We appreciate it more than we can say."

Thracia gave a bow of her own and walked out of the chamber, leaving Sola and Apailana alone.

"Is there anything you need me to do, Your Majesty?" she asked the young woman.

"I want you to work with the Jedi once they arrive. See that they're taken care of. Give them anything they need."

"Of course."

Apailana allowed a little smile. "I know how much helping the Jedi means to you, Sola. It's why I wanted you to know about this."

"It means a lot to Padmé, Your Highness." Sometimes, since her sister's death, Sola had felt like she was living to carry on Padmé's memory. "Master Cho Leem is right, though. This is dangerous."

"So was challenging the Trade Federation and fighting off an invasion," Apailana said. "Compared to what your sister did, this was nothing."

Apailana viewed Padmé Amidala with an almost childlike reverence. She yearned to follow her predecessor and live up to her bravery and idealism.

Sola didn't have the heart to remind her where bravery and idealism had gotten Padmé in the end. She felt it would be a bad omen.

* * *

We arrived in Theed just as the first light started shining in the eastern sky. We didn't get to see it; *Laranth* dove straight into the

main hangar complex sitting on the cliff's edge that overlooked the floodplain, and once we got off we were whisked away by security personnel into the tunnels that ran beneath the city, and for me at least it was a long time before I felt real honest daylight. As a Sullustan I grew up in caves and tunnels, so it shouldn't have bothered me, but it did.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

When we set *Laranth* down in the hangar amidst rows of pretty gleaming golden starfighters, we were met by a tall, pretty severe-looking woman who introduced herself as Raiella Maran, the chief of the Queen's security detail. Jax, as always, was at the lead of the group and he shook the woman's hand, but Djinn Altis hung behind him and looked a little edgy and naturally that made me edgy too.

Then this wizened, white-haired little human lady no taller than me popped out, seemingly from nowhere. Altis nearly swept her off her feet in a hug, and when they pulled out of the hug Altis dipped back in to give her one peck on the forehead and another on the lips.

I was finally getting what they said about these being non-traditional Jedi.

After the ice was broken, they led us into the tunnels beneath the hangar. The complex was attached to a massive plasma refinery station, where deep shafts of energy carved deeper holes into the planet's core in order to extract the raw energy there. I didn't understand half of what Maran told us, but I tried to look like I did.

Hett and Magash made it the whole way under their own power, though both looked pretty bad. Once we finally entered the lower levels of the palace complex, med-techs swept in and led them both away. Some of the other Jedi showed up to greet us, including one Duros Jedi who seemed especially pleased to see Ash. After that they showed us to our quarters, which like everything else were underground, without natural light or air. It felt almost like being back on Sullust, which (like I said) shouldn't have felt strange, but it did.

So we all settled into place, except for Hanna Ding.

Scout had explained to everyone the truth the Arkanian girl had been hiding. None of the Jedi seemed surprised, and I guess I wasn't either. The only question left was what to do with her.

Now that we were on Naboo she wasn't the burden, or the threat, she'd been on *Laranth*, but she was still a Force-user and I didn't trust her, especially after that confession. Still, I could tell Jax, Scout, and Altis wanted to be lenient. Hett gruffly suggested that we lock her in a deep dungeon. Kina Ha said we should keep her under close observation at all times, and that's what happened.

Thankfully, being a mere Force-insensitive, I didn't have the duty of watching her. I didn't have much of anything to do at all, and that was the problem.

I couldn't bring myself to admit that to Jax, but I told I-Five. We'd just finished hauling his pit droid chassis and a box of supplies into the little room I'd be sleeping in. Five, of course, didn't need sleep or a room, but we had to stash his stuff somewhere.

Once we'd done that, and an awkward silence filled the room, I sat down the side of my hard bunk and said, "I'm not sure how much longer I'm going to be here."

I-Five just stood there, looking at me with that blank HRD face.

When it was clear he wasn't going to respond I pressed, "Five, what do you think is going to happen here? Are we just going to hide underground for a couple days? A week? A month, a year?"

"I have no idea."

"Does Jax know? Does anyone?"

"Den, we just *got* here. You want to leave already?"

I looked at my hands. "I don't know."

"These Jedi have been hiding here for over a year. It seems like as safe a place as we're going to find."

"Hiding in the dark," I muttered.

"I admit it's not ideal, but I was talking to one of the Jedi. He said they slip out alone or in small groups and walk around the city... Once every few weeks."

I snorted and shook my head.

I-Five sat down next to me on the bunk. It was a smooth, natural movement, and for a second I almost forgot he was a droid.

"I admit it's not an enticing existence," he said, "But I'm sure these Jedi have ways to bide their time."

"We're *not* Jedi," I reminded him.

"No, but we seem to attract them like flies or a rotting nerf. Or maybe it's vice-versa." He was trying to joke. He didn't get my hint.

I tried a different tack. "Jax isn't going to like it here. Jax likes *doing* things."

"There isn't much to do down here, is there?"

"Even if we were back on Coruscant there wouldn't be. Five, Whiplash is *gone*. Haus, Sheel Mafeen, Yimmon, they're *all* dead. Syne and Slayke are gone too. The resistance to the Empire it totally *broken*."

I-Five's shoulders bowed forward. "There doesn't seem to be much cause for optimism, I'll admit that."

"Five, our mission is over. Done with. We failed and there's nothing else to do."

"We'll find something. Jax will find something."

It always came down to Jax, and there was nothing I could do about that. I didn't feel jealous right there, just tired. Very, very tired.

Softly, I-Five asked, "You want to leave, don't you?"

He was always more perceptive than he let on. "I don't know what else I can do here except hide."

"What would you do if you left?"

"I don't know. Go back to Sullust, see if Eyar Marath's still looking for a mate. Find a nice tunnel to build a nest in, sire a handful of kits..." I laughed dryly. That ship had soared off a long time ago. I'm not normally one to get stuck on regrets, but I did then.

To my surprise I-Five said, "For you, it's possible. Even if the Empire knows who you are and what you've done, they probably wouldn't look very hard for you."

"Compared to Jax, you mean."

"Exactly."

"And you, Five? You'd have an easier time slipping out than anybody. Just stick your processing unit in Sacha's ducky droid and carry you onto a ship."

He cocked an eyebrow. "And leave behind this hand-some, well-sculpted body?"

"Depends how bad you want to go."

"Den, I'm not leaving Jax."

"Yeah. I know. If I leave... If they *let* me leave, I'm on my own."

Slight surprise showed on I-Five's face, like he hadn't considered that part. He said, "Maybe you can have Jax wipe your memory."

Just the thought of telling Jax that I was walking out on him made me hesitate. Then I thought of Sarillion, of Slayke and Syne and all they'd done being stamped out beneath the Empire's boot-heels. I didn't want to die for nothing like them, but I didn't want to face Jax as a coward either. I felt trapped between two fears.

I sighed and said, "I'll have to think about it."

"Thank you for telling me" I-Five said.

I glanced at him sideways. Somehow he managed to convey so much understanding, so much compassion, in that human-replica face of his.

Before I could say anything, a shape filled the open door. I shifted my gaze to see a brown-haired human woman, probably in middle age, wearing a blue dress and white cloak over her shoulders. Definitely a Naboo native, I thought. Practical, casual fashion isn't a thing there.

"Hello," the woman smiled gently. "My name is Sola, Sola Naberrié. I'm a friend of Queen Apailana. If there's anything you need, I'm here to help."

Something about that name was vaguely familiar but I couldn't place it. I-Five stood up and offered his hand. I hopped off the bed and did the same.

After we all shook and shared names, Sola said, "I understand the two of you aren't Jedi."

"We're more like sidekicks," I-Five said lightly.

"I talked with Jax Pavan already. He said you two are his best friends."

That was like a punch in the gut. I-Five said, "We've been with him a long time. Two years, almost."

"Since the Empire was founded," Sola said. The polite smile on her face wilted into something very sad.

"Pardon my intrusion," I-Five said, "But are you the sister of Naboo's former queen?"

The sad look didn't go away. "I'm surprised you knew that. Padmé was killed the same time as the Jedi purge began. You two must have been..." She hesitated, and ended lamely, "You must have been busy then."

I-Five gave a slightly cocky smile. "I have a very good memory."

"Jax told me that too." She looked at I-Five, examined his face. Before either of us could ask what *else* Jax had told her, she said, "You really are a droid, aren't you?"

That smile got cockier. "If Jax hadn't told you, would you have known?"

"I don't know. But it wasn't Jax who told me, actually. It was Master Thracia who pointed that out."

"Well, Jedi have certain advantages the rest of us don't."

"I know. My sister..." Sola looked sad for a moment, then shook her head. "It doesn't matter. But what Master Thracia said confused me. She said you were a droid, but she also said she could feel you in the Force. Quite strongly, in fact."

That confused me. I spoke up for the first time. "I've heard Jax and the other Jedi can sense Five through the Force, which doesn't make any sense to me, not that I know how that stuff works. They've said he's got a faint presence, though."

"I certainly can't touch the Force the way Jax can," said Five, "At least, I don't think I can."

"Master Thracia said she could feel you quite clearly," Sola said. "She said you seemed almost... familiar."

I-Five managed to keep a perfect sabacc face on his HRD facade, but I knew that shook him. He said, "Master Altis said she has special skills involving technology and the Force."

I hadn't heard that part. I said, "Looks like you need to have a talk with her, then."

"I think I do."

Sola's eyes darted between us. She'd stumbled into something way beyond her understanding and knew it. We weren't any better off, but she didn't know that.

She put that polite smile back on and said, "I'm going to the medical wing to introduce myself to our two patients. Like I said, if you need anything at all, let me or one of the security staff one. We'll do our best to get you what you need."

"Thank you for stopping by," I said. "Tell Magash we said hello."

"I will," Sola nodded and excused herself.

That left the two of us, standing side-by-side in my narrow room. He looked down at me and I looked up at him.

I said, "I guess we now what *you're* going to be doing next."

"Indeed." He muttered. "And you?"

I looked around the bare stone walls of that dark little room. "I guess I've got some thinking to do."

"I think," he said, "I do too."

* * *

Jax Pavan had never been to Naboo, but he'd heard the planet referred to by a number of adjectives, ranging from 'unique,' 'charming,' and 'quaint,' to 'old-fashioned' and 'an oversized museum piece.' He hadn't seen much of Theed so he couldn't say anything for sure, but being quaint or old-fashioned hadn't stopped the Royal Palace from stocking its medical wing with the most up-to-date technology.

To his disappointment but not his surprise, Magash still refused a mechanical replacement for her severed arm, even though the Queen's staff had several fine models ready to install. Magash had limited herself to a nice bed and an intra-venous drip that helped replenish her liquids. When Jax stopped by the medical wing, Sacha was perched on a stool next to Magash's bed, telling her stories

from her podracing days and trying very hard to get the Zabrak woman to laugh.

Jax didn't even try to cheer A'Sharad Hett. The man had lost much more than an arm. He'd closed his emotions off from the Force even more than usual, and after their last conversation, that was starting to worry Jax, though he didn't know what could be done.

Physically, Hett wasn't difficult to fix. The Naboo surgeons had inserted a metal replacement for his shattered elbow-joint and used micro-sutures to knit the cracks in his femur and humerus together. They said he'd be back to swinging a lightsaber within a few days.

Once it was clear Hett no longer needed to stay in the medical wing, Jax asked him to step out for a meeting. There was a lot to talk about, and this time Jax wanted others in on the conversation.

They gathered in a round chamber at the base of one of the narrow towers jutting up around the rim of the Palace's main dome. The chamber even had windows that revealed the first real sunlight Jax had seen since Coruscant. Afternoon light flickered and danced on the surface of the lake that spread out beyond the bottom of the cliff on which the palace sat. The weather outside must have been cold; ice clung around the lake's edges.

He'd called three others to join himself and Hett. Djinn Altis, Thracia Cho Leem, and Kina Ha were the most senior Jedi on Naboo. They might well have been the most senior Jedi still alive, even if all three of them had chosen unorthodox paths.

Those paths were also why Jax had brought them together. They were about to talk about a very unorthodox Jedi.

Once everyone was seated in a circle, cross-legged on the hard marble floor, Jax began as simply and directly as he could. He looked around the group and said, "The man we know as Darth Vader was once Anakin Skywalker."

Thracia's eyes went wide. Altis looked suddenly sad. Kina Ha's head tilted thoughtfully on its long neck. Hett's face stayed a hard mask.

"I knew Anakin Skywalker," Jax said. "He was my friend, or something like it. I always knew he had a lot of anger inside, but this..."

"I knew him as well," Altis said. "We only met once, at the start of the war. I'd heard of him beforehand, of course. Every Jedi had, even ones that didn't lurk in the Temple. When I heard Yoda and Windu had found their so-called 'Chosen One,' my first thought was how *awful* that must feel for the poor child, to have that weight of that prophecy on his shoulders. And when we met at JanFathal..."

Altis took a deep breath. Jax waited intently; he'd had no idea Altis had ever met Anakin.

Yet before the old man could speak, Thracia Cho Leem said, "I met Anakin once, when he was a very small child. It was right before I left the Temple for the last time. He and his master, Kenobi, were on a mission to find my lost apprentice, Vergere." Thracia smiled softly, sadly. "They never found her. No one did. He was just a boy but you could tell he was under so much pressure."

"It wasn't just pressure," Hett. Jax tensed; after their last conversation he was afraid of what Hett might say. "Anakin wasn't born into the Temple. He was taken from his mother when he was a child. He tried to get back to her. When he found her she died in his arms. He got his revenge, though. Anakin slaughtered an entire village on Tatooine."

The three old Masters stared in stunned silence. Hett's face darkened as he continued, "Anakin told me this. I knew it. I was the only one who did. And what did I do? Nothing. Because my father died in my arms, and I knew how he felt. I hoped he would grow past his pain." His hands balled into fists. "I was wrong. I was wrong and because I was *generous*, Anakin destroyed the entire Jedi Order."

Jax had heard all this before. While the other Masters tried to collect their thoughts he told Hett, "You tried to help Anakin. You showed him mercy. It wasn't your fault."

"Mercy?" Hett made it sound like a curse. "I was *weak*. I should have killed him where he stood. The Republic, the Jedi, they'd be alive today. The people we care about would be alive."

After a moment's silence, Kina Ha spoke. "Unlike everyone else, apparently, I have *not* met Anakin Skywalker. The Council may have thought he was the 'Chosen One,' but he didn't save or destroy the Jedi Order. Palpatine did that, and if he hadn't made Anakin into his pet, he would have just used Dooku or Sora Bulq instead."

"I knew Sora Bulq" Altis said. "He tried to convince me to join his little band. And I knew Dooku, though less well. They were radicals, men with lofty ambitions and egos to match. Anakin *was* different from them. I could tell that when I met him. Anakin didn't care about politics like them. Anakin *loved*."

Jax stiffened. "When you say *love*, you mean-"

"He had a lover." Altis nodded. "I don't know who. But when he saw Geith and Callista together it just bled out through the Force. He was stunned. Stunned and *envious*. I told him he could leave the Temple and join my group whenever he wanted to, but he never did."

"Did he say why?" asked Thracia.

"He didn't have to. Yoda and Windu had their claws in him too tight. They'd drilled that destiny into his head, a *Jedi* destiny. *Their* kind of Jedi. He couldn't free himself of all that..." Altis shook his head and looked at Hett. "So you see, I, too, am to blame. I should have fought harder to convince Anakin, but I didn't. You're to blame, I'm to blame, so are Windu, Kenobi, Yoda, certainly Palpatine... Even Anakin himself."

Hett wasn't listening. He was staring at the floor with his jaw slightly cracked, forehead wrinkled in thought.

"Master Hett," Thracia asked, "What is it?"

"Anakin didn't just have a lover," he said. "Anakin had a *child*. I've seen him."

That was news to Jax. He asked, "What do you mean, *seen* him?"

"In the Force. The Force gave me a vision of another Skywalker at Belsavis, a grown man. I *knew* he was Anakin's son, or maybe a descendant. But Anakin never told me he had a lover."

Jax looked around the circle. He'd had Laranth, Hett had had Syne, Altis had very briefly mentioned a late wife, and he'd heard Thracia had even born children. As for Kina Ha, well, he had no idea how mating worked for normal Kaminoans, let alone thousand-year-old ones, but he was willing to bet she, too, had known love in her time.

Whatever fraction of the Jedi Order had been reassembled in this room on Naboo, none of them were like the Jedi of old. Jax was surprised how little that bothered him, even after hearing how Anakin's transgressions had led to tragedy.

When he thought of the warmth and purpose Laranth had given him, he knew Darth Vader had none of that now.

"His lover's dead," Jax said. "And his child... He might not even know he has one."

Altis gave a deep sigh. "We can't know anything for sure, not really. And for the moment we can't do anything about Vader."

"We should," Hett said firmly. "I refuse to sit here and do nothing while Vader keeps killing Jedi."

"I understand how you feel," said Altis. "Jedi are supposed to be out in the galaxy, *acting* to save people. That's what I always told Yoda. But Master Hett, I think you've suffered a grievous loss and-"

"My judgment is *not* clouded," Hett snarled. "I have never seen things clearer in my life."

"You can't go after Vader alone," Jax said. "Believe me, I've faced him again and again and barely made it out each time."

"Then help me." Hett stared at him. "Come with me. Together we'll find Vader and do what I should have done years ago."

Jax stared at him: that fierce tattooed face, those intense blue eyes. The other Masters seems to shrink and dwindle to nothing.

"Pavan, *please*," Hett said. "We understand Vader better than anyone."

"We're not the only ones who knew Anakin-"

"That's not what I mean."

Jax knew what Hett meant. All three of them had loved and lost. All three of them had come to live with the weight of dead parents on their backs.

But Jax had faced this choice before.

"On Kantaros Station," he said, "I fought Vader. He wanted to me to join him. I could tell through the Force he meant it. He wanted to use my pain, my grief, to make me into something like him. He wanted to justify his own fall by dragging me down with him. I couldn't do that. I can't give up the thing that made me a Jedi, even if I'm the last one in the universe."

"We're not going to join him!" Hett pounded his thigh. "We're going to *kill him!*"

"And then what?" Kina Ha's voice seem to come from a great distance.

Hett flinched and looked back at the Kaminoan. "What does it matter what happens to me? Vader will be dead. The galaxy will be a better place for billions of beings."

"Going after Vader in anger saves no one," Thracia said.

"Oh, spare me the sanctimonious Jedi piety." Hett shook his head in disgust. "Do you think it matters if my heart is *pure* when I strike him down? Do you think it matters to the families of all the people's he's killed? The ones he *will* kill unless someone stops him?"

"Killing Vader will not halt the Empire," Kina He said.

"It's a start." Hett unfolded his legs, stood up, and started for the door.

Thracia jumped to her feet fast than Jax thought possible.

"Master Hett!" Her voice boomed.

Hett turned around and stared down at the shrunken old woman. She stood barely as high as his sternum but her gaze stopped him in his tracks.

"Master Hett," she said, "This is *my* sanctuary. The people here are under *my* protection and I will not have their lives put at risk. Promise me that you will not leave Naboo without discussing it with me first. I want your word, as a Jedi."

Hett's face twisted. His lips parted and air hissed between his teeth, like he was caught between a sneer and a laugh, though Jax couldn't imagine what joke he'd heard in Thracia's steely voice.

"I give you my word," he said, and walked out of the room.

When he was gone, Altis lowered his head and sighed. "I think Vader might be the lesser problem right now."

"He'd been through a lot," Jax said. "He lost his wife *and* his child."

"We've all lost people we love," Altis reminded him.

Jax sighed too. He lowered his head to his hands, closed his eyes, breathed, lifted it again. "He's right about one thing. We can't all hide here forever."

"Where do you have to go?" Kina Ha asked.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"For now you wait here and recover," Thracia said. "And when you *do* leave..."

"I'll make sure to discuss it with you." Jax tried to smile.

"That's all I ask," the old woman said graciously. "Now, if you don't mind, there's something else I'd like to discuss with you."

Jax struggled to push Anakin and Hett from his thoughts. "What's that?"

"Your droid," he said simply.

"I-Five is nobody's droid but his own." Jax's eyes flicked to Altis; the old man was listening intently.

"I can sense your droid in the Force," she said.

"That's right. And believe me, I have no idea how. I know it shouldn't even be possible."

"That," Thracia said, "Is up for debate."

Jax frowned. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'd like to spend some time with you and I-Five. We have a good deal to talk about."

Suddenly Hett and Anakin were the last things on his mind. He looked into that old woman's ice-blue eyes and said, "Okay. I'll get him right away."

21

"Tucked away under Naboo Palace, we didn't have much exposure to what was going on in the rest of the galaxy, but Sola brought us some snippets of news. The HoloNet was full of coverage of the battle at Sarillion. The whole thing was stomach-churning. Syne, Slayke, and Yimmon were the evil anarchist rebels who massacred helpless civilians and Octavian Grant was the pure noble hero who brought them down. There were also hints that the three villains had been part of the continuing Jedi conspiracy to destabilize the galaxy. I warned Sola not to share that news with Hett, because if it was awful to me, it would be unspeakable to him."

After the Battle of Sarillion, Jan Dodonna returned to Imperial Center a hero.

He'd been a hero before. It felt different this time.

Unlike the embarrassments at Bavinyar, N'zoth, and Ord Mirit, the victory at Sarillion got plenty of press coverage. The news networks did a wonderful job playing up the fight's dramatic finish, especially focusing on the timely arrival of Captain Griff's ships just as Syne was making her charge at Grant's flagship.

Dodonna, Grant, and Griff had promptly been called back to Imperial Center to receive the Azure Cross, one of the Empire's newly-created medals of honor. When Dodonna had received the

Holt Cross with Terrinald Screed after the Battle of Anaxes, he'd considered it the proudest moment of his career.

Now he didn't know how to feel.

The awards ceremony was set to take place at noon the day after his arrival on Coruscant. Admiral Screed had flown into the capital to be part of the awards ceremony, and Dodonna had arranged to meet his friend at the man's under-construction home in Imperial City.

He'd briefly talked to Screed over holo to set up the meeting. The man seemed politely cheery. Dodonna had been unable to speak with him before Sarillion, which still bothered him. If he'd gone into the fight with a clearer understanding of what his duties and objectives were as Grant's 'observer,' it was possible fewer Imperial lives would have been lost.

Dodonna was, therefore, feeling awkward and nervous when the taxi brought him to the private entrance to Screed's penthouse. He was surprised to find it was in one of the finest high-rises in Imperial City, less than a kilometer away from the prestigious building once called the 500 Republica, now 500 Imperial. Dodonna was impressed; a senior admiral's salary was good, but not *that* good. A section of four storeys had been blocked off by construction droids and scaffolding, but apparently enough of it was completed for Screed to live in during his stay on the planet.

When he stepped onto the docking platform, Screed was there to greet him. Like Dodonna, he was dressed in his olive-green uniform. His short dark hair was tussled by the wind and used his carved obsidian cane to steady himself.

"It's good to see you, Jan," he said. He sounded warm, sincere.

"Likewise," Dodonna nodded. "Should we get inside?"

"Of course. Follow me," Screed said.

As the taxi pulled away, Screed led him into the lowest level of his penthouse. It was, to Dodonna's surprise, already well-appointed with furniture and art objects. As Screed directed him toward a pair of chairs facing each other across a short table, the admiral gave a short sharp whistle.

A moment later, a pale, lankly young Twi'lek appeared. He clasped his hands in front of him, bowed low, and said, "What is it you want, my master? Something to eat? A drink, perhaps?"

Screed glanced at Dodonna. "Your pick, Jan? Do you want tea? Caf? Or something stronger?"

It was a damned good question. He felt tense; anxious. Something to soften his nerved would help. He asked, "Do you have any whiskey?"

"Of course. Boc, fetch that bottle of Johrian."

The Twi'lek bowed again and slunk away.

"Boc is my best servant, very attentive. I take him wherever I go." Screed said as he lowered his stiff body into a chair.

Dodonna took the opposite seat and glanced out the broad window at the skyline. "A lovely view."

"It is, isn't it?" Screed smiled slightly. "On Anaxes, my quarters look out on the parade ground. I feel nostalgic every time I look out the window."

"Those were simpler times."

"Indeed." Screed shifted his body slightly and leaned his cane against the table. "I'm glad you're here, Jan. I understand Sarillion got quite hairy."

"That's an understatement. I thought-"

Before he could say anything more, Boc appeared. He placed a tray in front of them: one partially-drunk bottle of dark whiskey and two small glasses. The Twi'lek poured a mouthful of whiskey into either glass.

"Let me know if there's anything else you need," Boc smiled. His teeth were like crooked white needles.

"That will be all. You may go."

Boc bowed again and disappeared. Dodonna watched him go, then asked, "Where did you get your servant?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter where," Screed said. He leaned forward and picked up his glass. "Boc's much more intuitive than a droid, or most subhumans. I need all the help I can get these days."

Dodonna stiffened at that word, *subhuman*. It was becoming more and more common lately, subtly replacing *non-human* and

the more casually pejorative *alien*. He couldn't recall Screed using it before.

The admiral raised his glass for a toast. Dodonna picked up his and raised it as well.

"To coming home from every fight," Screed said.

It was as good a toast as any. Dodonna tipped his cup back and drank. It felt like fire burning down his throat and dropping into his stomach.

"Oh," he breathed, "Oh, goodness."

Screed smiled a little as he set his glass down. "Haven't had it for a while, have you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then you need to get back into practice." Screed poured another mouthful for them both.

"I'll hold off for now," Dodonna said.

"Very well." Screed put his glass on the table and settled back in his chair. "I'm sure you want to be in good condition for the ceremony tomorrow, but a few more won't hurt."

"I know. I can hold my liquor, Terrinald."

"I remember. You were better at it than me, even before..." Screed trailed off. With chunks of his body replaced by machinery, he no longer possessed the tolerance he'd had when they were younger.

Dodonna felt warm in the belly and a little light in the head. It gave him the courage to ask what he'd been wanting to. "I have a request."

Screed blinked his real eye; the mechanic one stared straight at him. "Go ahead."

"I was hoping you could make some last-minute adjustments to the honor roll."

"Is there someone else you think deserved the Azure Cross? I've reviewed your report, and Grant's, and Griff's."

"I was actually hoping for a posthumous honor."

Screed frowned thoughtfully. "That's not unheard-of. Who are you suggesting?"

"Captain Ni-sihl-Nahm, of *Starwind*."

Screed didn't say anything. He turned his head slightly, like he was contemplating something out the window.

"It doesn't have to be the Azure Cross, but I think some medal of bravery is in order. Griff's arrival was decisive, yes, but Syne still would have destroyed *Empire Star*, would have killed both Grant and myself, if Captain Nahm hadn't rammed *Valediction*. If this ceremony is supposed to celebrate the death of Jereveth Syne, we should honor the one who actually killed her."

Screed took a deep breath and said, "I'm not sure that's a good idea, Jan."

"Why not? The man sacrificed his ship to save a bigger one. He *died* for the Empire. Captain Nahm was a hero."

"I'm not sure he'd what the Empire needs in terms of heroes right now."

"Then what does it need? *Grant*?"

Screed's eyes swung back to him. "What does that mean?"

Dodonna realized he'd misspoken. "I'm sorry. That came out harsher than I meant."

"Then what *do* you mean?"

"Terrinald, you read my report. We lost thousands of good men and good ships because Grant wanted to lure Syne out from her hiding place and into his trap."

"He did. His trap worked."

"It worked because Ni-sihl sacrificed himself."

"And because Grant had an effective plan."

"It cost too many lives."

"The battle was won. The threat is over. That's what matters, Jan."

Dodonna was shocked at how adamant he was being. He looked down at his cup of whiskey. He let the urge take over, picked up the glass, and swallowed. It burned a little less this time and made his head swim a little more.

"Terrinald," he asked, "Why did you give Grant command of that mission?"

Screed frowned. "Excuse me?"

"He was commanding ships from the Home Fleet. That means you put him in charge of the task force. Given that he'd failed with Syne before, why did you let him go after her again?"

"He made a compelling case," Screed said stiffly.

"What kind of case?"

"His case was that he knew Syne better than anyone else, and he could use their personal antagonism to his advantage, that he could bait Syne into making a mistake. He was right."

"Is that all?"

Screed was getting angry. "Jan, what are you *talking* about?"

He wasn't sure himself, but as he looked around the splendor of this half-completed penthouse he was starting to get an idea.

Sharply, he asked, "Why isn't Ni-sihl the hero we need?"

Screed blinked, said nothing.

"Is it because he was Cerean? Or are they all just *sub-humans* now?"

"Jan, don't be ridiculous."

"That man sacrificed his life, his entire ship, to kill Syne. He deserves that medal more than me or Grant."

"I'm not questioning his bravery, or his loyalty. I'm simply saying the Empire needs to focus on the future. We need live heroes, not martyrs."

"What about his family? He has wives and children. Are they going to be looked after?"

"You know the Empire's policy. His family will get a regular stipend."

"Cereans have big families. They'll need more than a stipend."

Screed sighed. "Jan, it's a blanket policy. We can't keep changing it for every race, just because some *non*-humans breed in litters."

Rigid silence fell over the room. Screed scooped up his second glass of whiskey and downed it. He didn't pour another.

Eventually Dodonna asked, "What happens to me now? What's my reward for standing on Grant's bridge and doing nothing?"

"You get a medal," Screed muttered.

"Am I still going to be stationed at N'zoth?"

"I'm not sure. But it seems likely."

"And Grant? Is he going back to his sector fleet?"

"That is *unlikely*," Screed admitted. "With Syne gone, we're turning our attention to some rogue elements in the Outer Rim. We may find a part for Grant in that."

Dodonna looked down at his empty glass and didn't speak.

"What do you want. Jan? Do *you* want to go to the Western Reaches and fight some Sep hold-outs? It can happen if you want it to."

Screed's voice had gone softer. He was making a peace offering, or at least he thought he was. Dodonna felt sick.

"I don't want that," he said. "I'm sick of this damned fighting. I thought the war was over."

"It is," Screed said, "But the Empire won't be secure until our borders are."

Dodonna looked out on the Coruscant skyline and saw a vision of the future: endless little wars, endless subjug-ation of anything vaguely perceived as a threat to a New Order that increasingly concentrated power in the hands of Palpatine and a handful of loyal humans whose ruth-lessness matched his own.

It was an awful vision. He didn't know what he could do to change it, but he didn't want to be part of it either.

He looked down at his chest, at his rank badge, and wondered for the first time what he'd do if he just walked away.

He couldn't think of anything, but he knew he'd have to keep thinking about it once his head cleared. Right then it seemed like the most important thing in the galaxy.

"Terrinald," he said, "I'd like to leave now."

Screed didn't object. He called for Boc, and Boc summoned a taxi and led Dodonna out onto the landing platform. Screed didn't bother to get up from his chair as he waved Dodonna off.

As they stood on the windy platform, Dodonna looked at Boc and asked, "How long have you been Terrinald's servant?"

Boc blinked his red eyes and said, "Oh, not long. Just a year."

"Is he a... good master? Does he pay you well?"

Boc gave a needle-toothed smile. "I have food and shelter. Isn't that payment?"

What he was suggesting made Dodonna's stomach turn. He had to be jesting; there was a taunting leer in his eyes.

"Have you met Octavian Grant?" Dodonna asked.

"Oh, yes. I've met Grant. He came here to plead his case to the Admiral. Several times."

"Can you... tell me what case he made?"

"Why do you want to know" The Twi'lek's grin was openly mocking now.

"I'm simply curious, that's all."

Boc considered something for a moment, then said, "I'm afraid I can't divulge my master's secrets."

"Of course. I wasn't asking you to."

He was. They both knew it. Boc's smile grew wider. He said, "You're different."

"Different from whom?"

"All my master's other... friends."

Before Dodonna could ask what he meant, the taxi arrived. Boc shrunk back toward the door, ending the conversation. Somehow, Dodonna knew he'd have only gotten more hints and mocking from the servant anyway. He got into the taxi and felt relief when it pulled away, but the relief didn't last long. He hadn't solved any of his problems and he hadn't escaped them; he was as trapped by them as ever.

22

"I-Five was, by any objective measure, a miracle. For a droid to be as self-aware as he was, not to mention present in the Force somehow, should have been impossible. After so many years I'd come to take it for granted, but meeting so many new people again reminded me how impossible he really was. Still, I never thought he was anything more than a kind of freak accident, a byproduct of whatever tinkering Lorn Pavan had done twenty years ago. I certainly never had any idea of the real truth."

They gathered with Thracia in a dark chamber where the only light came from a winking candle the old woman placed in the center of the room. They all sat down to face the candle: Jax, I-Five, Thracia herself.

The woman began by asking I-Five about his history. The droid was still wearing his HRD body, the only chassis they'd brought with them from *Laranth*, and he sat with his legs crossed and back straight in imitation of the two Jedi's mediation postures. He told Thracia every-thing working backward from his encounter with Jax to his time traveling with Den, then his months on Drongar, and finally back to his time with Lorn Pavan.

"I owe Jax's father a lot," I-Five said. "If he hadn't modified my program to allow greater freedom of cog-nition I would have never become what I am today."

"Was Lorn an expert programmer?"

"He was a good programmer. He wasn't really an *expert* in anything. He did a lot of different jobs."

Thracia thought for a moment, then asked, "Have you ever wondered why no other droids have become as self-aware as you?"

"Maybe they have," Jax offered. "It's a big galaxy."

"It is," Thracia acknowledged, "But it's just been through a terrible war where droids were some of the main combatants. Granted, the Separatists were mostly concerning with making droids kill as efficiently as possible, but don't you think some ambitious tech might have tried to improve droid cognition also?"

"I'm sure some did," Jax said, "But like you said, the Separatists wanted killing machines. They'd have cut short research geared toward anything else."

Thracia looked to I-Five. "Have you ever heard of other 5YQ protocol droids developing like you have?"

"No," Five admitted, "And I have looked."

"So, in all the galaxy, with all the artificial intelligences out there and all the programing geniuses, it took one short-lived protocol droid model and one down-on-his-luck information dealer to create the only droid in history to touch the Force."

"Stranger things may have happened," I-Five said, "But I haven't heard of them."

"You seem very proud to be what you are."

"I'm practically a whole new life form, one that, if I dare say, improves upon you humans quite a bit."

"Five..." Jax warned.

The droid shrugged. "Why shouldn't I feel a little proud?"

"Your new chassis is especially impressive," Thracia said. "I've seen Human Replica Droids before, but none of them acted as human as you do."

"I'll choose to take that as a compliment."

"You do look pretty authentic," Jax said, "Except for that manual off-switch on your backside."

"I don't know what switch you're talking about." I-Five tugged the back of his jacket down.

More seriously, Thracia said, "You have to admit, what you've become does sound rather unbelievable."

"My father probably had the Force," Jax said. "I mean, if I had it, he might have had something too, even if he never got real training. That might have affected things."

Thracia narrowed her eyes. She was thinking hard on something but she didn't seem willing to volunteer it yet. Instead she asked I-Five, "What did you do before you met Lorn Pavan?"

"I was a nanny," I-Five said dryly, "For some really annoying rich brats. Then their parents found out that 5YQ droids were no longer in fashion, so they sold me to a junk dealer. Lorn ended up buying me cheap."

"And before that?"

"I can't say." He shrugged again. "Those people thought they bought me fresh from the assembly line. I never saw any reason to doubt that."

"So those are your first memories?"

He nodded. The old woman looked very thoughtful again. Jax was about to ask her what was happening when she said, "I-Five, I want you to picture something. To hold it in your mind. I want to see if I can sense it."

"We've tried this before," Jax said. "None of us could do it."

Thracia smiled thinly. "Humor me. Please."

"All right," I-Five said. He didn't need to, but he closed his eyes to show he was in thought.

Thracia closed her eyes to. Jax held back from touching either of them with the Force, afraid he might upset whatever delicate methods the old woman was using.

It took less than a minute. Thracia's eyes opened and she said, "One of those podracing pit droids."

I-Five's eyes opened too. "You got it."

"Try something else," Jax said.

I-Five blinked. "Okay. Try now."

He didn't close his eyes that time. Neither did Thracia. She frowned and said, "A Sith holocron."

"We don't have that any more," Jax interjected.

"Try one more," said I-Five.

"A spaceship. A Jedi starfighter."

I-Five put on a slanted smile. "That was pretty good."

"Could you feel her touch your mind?" Jax asked.

"I don't know what that's supposed to feel like," I-Five shook his head. "I guess that means I didn't."

"Not even Master Altis could do that," Jax told Thracia. "Where did you learn that skill?"

"An old Master," she replied. "His name was Lath Melray."

"Sounds Nemoidian," Jax said. "They're supposed to be weak in the Force."

"There are exceptions. I heard there was even a Hutt Jedi a long time ago. Lath Melray grew up in their droid factories, which is probably where he learned to communicate with machines. It was always his specialty."

"I've never heard of him," Jax said.

"Oh, he died a long time ago, probably before you were born," she said. "He had little Temple training and was not a traditional Jedi."

"Those seems to be all over lately," I-Five muttered.

"You can find amazing things when you leave home behind," Thracia smiled a little. "That's what I told Mace. He should have listened to me."

Her smile turned sad. Jax prodded, "Did you train under Master Melray?"

"Yes, but not officially. After Master Yoda knighted me I decided I wanted to explore the galaxy for a while. I found Lath working alone, on a colony near Cato Nemoidia. He was already old then, and he'd given up the life of both the Jedi and Nemoidians to work in his laboratory."

"He experimented with droids?" I-Five asked.

"He thought he could use the Force to connect with artificial minds," Thracia nodded. "I spent years in his tutelage. And I've tried to pass that knowledge on to others, like Djinn."

"It's an incredible skill," Jax said. He was instantly envious not to have learned it himself. "It's a wonder they didn't teach it in the Temple."

"Like a lot of Force skills, some beings are better attuned to it than others. My last apprentice, Vergere, could never learn it at all."

Something mournful came over her face. Jax said, "You've mentioned Vergere before. You said she disappeared?"

"And was never found. I'd lost people I cared about before, but it was different then. Vergere was... special."

"In what way?"

"I learned as much from her as she learned from me, I think. She made me feel young again." Her smile was bittersweet. "She was always asking questions, always finding lessons in what I taught her that I never intended. When I told this to her once, she asked me 'Is it what the teacher teaches, or what the student learns?' I never found an answer to that, which maybe was the point."

"I wish I'd know her," Jax said.

"I wish you had too. She had a way of looking beyond the accepted truths we Jedi cling to. Toward the end, she was even questioning whether the Dark and Light Side of the Force exist at all."

Jax frowned. "How can that be? Everything we've learned-"

"We've been told that the Force embraces everything. It can even bind people to machines. If it can bridge those opposites, it should bridge light and dark as well. That is what Vergere was thinking. As for me, well, I think there's always more to learn."

"I wish you'd tried to teach this at the Temple."

"Oh, I'm like Djinn and Melray. I prefer to do things on my own. I always have. I left the Order permanently after I lost Vergere. I never saw the Temple again, never talked to Master Windu..."

"Did you fight in the Clone Wars?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm too old to fight and wouldn't have if I could. I knew from the start the war was wrong. I knew it would eat the Order from the inside-out. Jedi are peacekeepers, not generals."

"I never had to be a general," Jax said. "I lost my padawan's braid just before the war ended."

"You were lucky."

"I don't know," Jax sighed. "I've spent almost two years thinking I was the last Jedi in the galaxy. We've been in over our heads so often it's amazing we're still alive. There's so much I wish I'd had a chance to learn."

Thracia spread her hands. "It's never too late to learn. Or to teach."

Jax looked at I-Five, who had gone pensively silent. "Can you teach me how to influence machines like you? Can I touch I-Five's mind?"

The droid blinked, suddenly alert. "I'm sorry, *what?*"

"I want to see how close we can get in the Force."

The droid's posture stiffened in perfect imitation of a human faced with a prospect he found uncomfortable. He didn't object, though, and Thracia said, "If you'd like, I can try to bridge your thoughts."

"How would that even *work?*" I-Five said. "My processor isn't *anything* like a human brain. It's far more sophisticated."

"I believe I may be able to serve as a bit of a..." Thracia paused and considered her words. "Call me a translator."

"I'd like to try," Jax said, looking seriously at I-Five.

The droid gave an imitation sigh and said, "All right. What do I have to do?"

"Trust me to handle it," Thracia said.

She rose to her feet and walked around to the other side of the candle. She sat again, filling the space between Jax and I-Five. She placed one hand on Jax's shoulder, the other on I-Five's.

"This is how Melray first taught me," she said. "So please, close your eyes. Or visual receptors. Try to empty your thoughts."

It sounded like standard Jedi meditation technique. Jax did as ordered, shutting his eyelids tight and blocking out the waver of the candle-light.

He felt Thracia send calm to him through the Force. He trusted she was doing the same to I-Five in the unique way Lath Melray

had taught her. He felt I-Five's familiar Force-presence grow brighter, or perhaps he was simply being drawn closer to it. He felt something from it, a calm that mirrored his own but also curiosity and skepticism.

I-Five's presence grew brighter. Images seemed to resolve out of the black, plucked from I-Five's machine consciousness. He saw himself and Den. He saw Laranth, scowling slightly, more vivid than his own memories. His chest clenched tight but more images kept coming. He saw a Jedi woman in dark robes, sitting at a table in a crowded cantina. He saw Tuden Sal with a cunning toothy smile, looking at least ten years younger than the Sal that Jax had known. He saw a cloaked figure holding a light-saber, red blades sizzling out of either end.

He saw his father, Lorn Pavan, grinning a weary affectionate grin-

-the grin becomes a scowl bent low over a glass as he says, "Here's all you need to know about the Jedi. They're a bunch of self-serving sanctimonious elitists"-

-the scowl becomes serious and said as he says, "I'm sorry, Five, but this is something I have to do"-

- "a Jedi isn't all I want to be," says a round-faced woman, looking upward with youthful conviction in her dark familiar eyes-

He didn't understand. He tried to speak but it was as though his jaw was made of metal and refused to open. Thracia's hand clenched tighter on his shoulder and the sensations, the images, the memories kept rolling past-

- "I want to learn from you, Master Melray," the young woman says, "I want to touch the Force in ways nobody ever has!"-

-a cramped old workshop filled with cobbled-together processors and hollowed-out metal bodies from every kind of droid imaginable, from squat astromechs to Baktoid war machines to tiny mouse droids to a new gray-shelled protocol model-

-so many round green Nemoidian faces staring with scorn in their red eyes at this stranger, this interloper, this freak, this Jedi-

The connection snapped in an instant. The images fell away. Jax popped his eyes open and saw the candle, still wavering against the

dark. He felt Thracia's fingers unlatch from his shoulder. He looked to see I-Five with his mouth slack and his eyes wide open and a very real, very human shock on his face.

Jax felt something roll down his forehead. He wiped it away with his hand and realized his entire body was soaked in sweat. He was panting, short of breath. Thracia, too, looked exhausted.

But I-Five, he just looked stunned.

"What *was* that?" Jax breathed. "Five, did you see-"

"I saw it," he rasped. "But I don't... I don't *under-stand*."

We both looked to Thracia. The old woman wiped a bit of sweat from her face, took a deep breath, and said, "I believe... I believe I understand what happened to Lath Melray."

"How did he die?" asked Jax.

Thracia closed her eyes and exhaled. "One of his Nemoidian assistants found his body in his lab. He was assumed to have died from old age."

"His droids?" I-Five asked. His voice trembled.

"I heard they were put on the market. Sold."

It was incredible. Impossible. Yet it explained too much.

"I never remembered that," I-Five said. "*Any* of it. Those aren't my memories. They're-"

"They belong to Lath Melray," Thracia said.

"But how is that *possible*?" Jax asked.

Thracia stared into the candlelight and seemed lost in her thoughts. "I last saw him a few years before he died. When we spoke, he was talking about... transferring his essence into a machine."

I-Five stared. Jax managed to say, "I've heard about Sith transferring themselves from one body to another. *Organic* bodies. But Melray-"

"He was no Sith," Thracia said firmly. "Yes, he was unorthodox, but he never dabbled in their ways. The Sith wanted to transfer their spirits from one body to another to cheat death. Melray... Melray wanted to push the boundaries. He wanted to find new ways of experiencing the Force. The Sith, they steal other being's bodies and

destroy the spirits within. Melray didn't want that, but if he tried it with a droid, he wouldn't have to take alive."

"For a moment," Jax said, "I felt... stiff. It was almost like I was... *inside* I-Five."

"You were inside my thoughts," the droid said. "You saw what I saw."

"For a second I felt like I was in your *body*."

"Melray taught me to be a conduit," Thracia muttered. "To *bridge* the minds of two beings. Even a man and a machine."

"But Five..." Jax's eyes settled on his friend. "Is he *really* a machine?"

"I'm not Melray!" I-Five's voice was shrill. Jax had never seen him so distressed. "I'm not some dead Jedi Master, I'm just a *droid*! I'm the way I am because of Lorn, *not* some... some essence-transfer thing!"

"The transfer must have been imperfect," Thracia said. "When Lorn modified you, he must have somehow unlocked little pieces of Melray. That's how you became sentient. *That's* why you register in the Force."

"I'm not him!" I-Five jumped to his feet. "I don't remember *being* him! I'm a droid! A rodding droid!"

Jax held up a hand. "I-Five, wait, we need to think about this."

"No!" I-Five waved both arms. "I can't do this any more! I'm going!"

I-Five marched for the door. Jax tried to rise but Thracia's hand clamped down, shockingly strong, on his shoulder.

He sat back down. After the door slammed shut behind I-Five she softly said, "Now you know."

"I can't believe this," Jax shook his head. "I-Five, he's... he's my friend. I never expected anything like this. Does this mean, deep inside him, he's *all* Melray? Is there some dead Jedi trying to get out of him?"

"I don't know. Maybe. When I bridged you two, when I really touched him, I felt..."

She trailed off. He pressed, "What? What did you feel?"

"I felt my old Master had come back from the dead," she said. He saw the lines on her face glint with tears.

"But if Melray's spirit is in I-Five, what does that mean? Can it be transferred to a new body?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

"But if we did that, what would happen to I-Five? Would *he* be transferred too?"

"I just don't know. I'm sorry."

Jax stared at the candle and tried to focus his thoughts on the light. He couldn't find calm. Even after all the loss and revelation of the past few days, he'd never expected anything like this.

"I need to think," he said, and got to his feet.

As he walked toward the door he heard the old woman mutter behind him, "As do we all."

* * *

I hadn't told anyone except I-Five that I was thinking of leaving. I couldn't bring myself to tell Jax, and I could easily picture the looks on Magash and Sacha's faces if I tried to tell them: lofty scorn on the first, pure disappointment on the latter.

So, stuck in limbo, I tried to keep myself busy by talking with Sola and a few of the other Hapan guards. Once they found out I wasn't a Jedi I think they opened up to me a little more; normal beings were a rarity in the lower levels of Naboo Palace and that created a certain kinship.

Still, I took to wandering the tunnels by myself. Certain areas, especially the paths leading out under the city, were blocked off by live and electronic security, but there were still plenty of narrow, dark places I could slink around until I could almost imagine I was back on Sullust, which like I've said, wasn't as comforting as I thought it would be.

I was doing that restless wandering down an unlit tunnel no human could have possibly seen in when I heard the sound of human breathing. Not heavy breathing, but fast breathing.

Curiosity warred against cowardice. For once, curiosity won. I went further down the tunnel, turned a corner, and with my oh-so-good Sullustan eyes saw a human figure sitting on the cold stone floor, legs curled up against his chest, head on his knees.

It was I-Five.

For a second I just stared. I-Five was a droid with droid eyes, so it made sense he could get here, but he was *not* a human with human lungs. Still, his chest contracted and expanded quickly like a man in panic taking sharp, deep breaths. In his HRD body, I-Five had gotten good at mimicking human body language for the benefit of his company. It seemed like he'd gotten so good that he was now doing it even when people weren't around.

Then I realized I was overthinking everything. This was I-Five, and whatever he was doing here, however he was doing it, he was in trouble.

"Hey," I said in the dark, "I-Five, what's wrong?"

He picked his head up. Those electronic eyes spotted me in the dark, maybe two meters away. He asked, "Did Jax send you?"

"I've haven't seen Jax in hours. I thought you were doing something with him."

"Why are you *here*?"

He sounded angry, desperate, panicked. I'd seen my robotic friend exhibit an impressive variety of mental states, but I'd never seen him like this.

"Just stretching my legs," I muttered. "Five, what's going on?"

He looked back at his kneecaps. "I'm not I-Five."

I blinked. "Then what are you?"

"I'm a Jedi." One laugh shook his body. "I'm a kriffing Jedi Master, Den, couldn't you tell?"

I blinked again. "Five, what were you-"

"I saw it!" He slapped a hand against the stone. "That woman, Thracia, she showed it to me. Some of it. I can remember... some of it..."

I took two steps closer. "Five, what are you *talking* about?"

"Den, haven't you wondered *why* I am what I am?"

"We know why. Lorn Pavan modified your processor, gave you the power to think independently."

"Yeah, and then Tuden Sal wiped my memory back to zero. But I'm still *me*, Den."

"I know. You had a little trouble remembering, but it all came back to you."

"And that's supposed to be impossible. But it happened. Just like a droid thinking by itself is impossible. And a droid touching the Force. But all of that happened."

"You were always proud of being unique."

He laughed again. "Oh, I'm unique all right. The first Jedi essence transfer from a wet to a machine... or some-thing."

I took another step closer. "Five, you're gonna have to explain this to me. Slowly."

"Thracia says..." He laughed; it sounded like choking. "That woman says that I'm her old *Master*. This old Nemoidian Jedi who taught her to mind-meld with machines. She says he transferred his Force essence, his soul, whatever, into my original 5YQ body."

I almost said that was impossible, but everything about I-Five was impossible. And, I thought, this one impossibility actually did, in its way, explain those other ones.

I-Five was not taking it as rationally as I was. His hands clenched into fists and unclenched at his side as he said, "And she's *right*, Den. I can *remember* it. Not most of it, but little bits and pieces. They're rattling around inside my head. Maybe *all* of him's still in me."

I crouched down beside him and asked, "Can you feel the Force at all?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I can almost remember what it felt like, touching the Force, but now... I can't do it now."

"Maybe you need midi-chlorians for that after all," I muttered.

"Den, what *am* I?" He stared at me through the dark. "I feel like... there's this *thing* inside me, and if it takes over I won't be *me* any more!"

I tilted my head. "After all you've been through- getting your memory wiped and all that- you're still *you*, I-Five."

"That was different! That was Sal scrambling my processor. This, I don't know what this is."

"Listen, Five, this is way past my depth. Did you talk to Jax?"

"Jax is as confused as I am. Not even Thracia really gets it."

We fell into awkward silence. I blew out a breath and said, "What happens now?"

"I don't know."

"Are you going to meet with Thracia again?"

"I don't know," he repeated, but I knew he would. He couldn't get just a hint of revelation and walk away. He needed to know more.

"This sounds like it's going to take time to work out," I said.

Dully, he nodded. "What are you going to do, Den?"

Sitting beside him in the dark corridor, I figured there was only one option. There had always been one option, ever since I sat down next to that weird protocol droid in that cantina on Drongar in what felt like another life.

"I'll stay," I said, very quietly.

I-Five didn't respond, but I knew he'd heard. We stayed there for a little while longer, not speaking, just sitting together in the dark.

* * *

For Scout, it almost felt like a homecoming. She remembered many of Jedi hiding beneath Naboo Palace, even if they'd met only briefly before Master Altis scattered his people. Simply being around so many Force-users again made her world feel vibrant, even if she was stuck in dark underground tunnels the whole time.

Altis' Jedi were also quick to welcome Sacha and Magash. The latter seemed to have recovered from the shock and pain of losing her arm, and now walked the halls bearing the severed stump of her left shoulder almost proudly.

Less than a day after their arrival, she watched Sacha and Magash meet Ash Jarvee and her Duros friend Ran Nebr in a sparring ring once used by the queen's royal guard. Sacha got her

butt handed to her by Ash, as expected, but she took her drubbing eagerly and picked up a few tips on handling a lightsaber. As for Magash, she picked up an Inquisitor lightsaber from Prakith and almost knocked Ran Nebr out of the ring.

Scout would have felt much better about all if it if she knew what to do about Hanna Ding.

As per instructions, the Arkanian girl was kept under steady surveillance. She was shadowed during the day, sometimes by Scout, sometimes by Ash or Ran Nebr or some other Altisian Jedi. The tunnels beneath the palace were crowded with Jedi and it was easy to make the shadowing look casual, though she knew Hanna wouldn't be fooled.

At night they shared quarters. Their bunks were stacked, Hanna's on top of Scout's. The first night Scout had been afraid to rest, and she'd clung to consciousness until sleep finally claimed her near dawn. The next morning, Hanna claimed she'd fallen asleep right away. The second night Scout allowed herself more rest, and Hanna was still in the bunk above the next morning.

In the end, there simply wasn't anywhere else for Hanna to go.

On the third afternoon it started to snow. Scout had no way of knowing that; almost all of the halls and rooms the Jedi had access to were buried underground. She was in the practice hall, watching Sacha and Magash spar against each other, when Ash Jarvee stepped into the room. Scout expected her to start giving fighting tips, but instead a broad smile spread on the woman's face.

"Come on," she waved, "There's something you should see."

Ash led Scout, Sacha, and Magash into a lift tube that took them several levels higher. After that, she took them to a round chamber with broad glass windows looking out on the floodplain that spread beyond the cliff's edge. Others had already gathered there, facing the window. Scout picked out Hanna Ding's pale bare shoulders and pale long hair standing off to the side.

The sky outside was a pale gray. Snow was drifting down toward a brown plain now tinted with white. Fat flakes bobbed and danced slowly on the wind.

As they stepped close to the widow, Ash said, "It's been cold for weeks, so the snow should stick."

"I've never seen snow," Scout muttered.

"I know. You've told me." Ash smiled tightly.

Scout had spent her childhood on Coruscant, and the time since then in flight. She'd arrived on Mandalore at the start of spring and had fled before winter set in. Since then she'd been hopping planets with Ash and Altis, never stayed in one place long enough to see the turn of seasons.

She reached out and pressed her hand against the glass. Thinner and cooler than the transparisteel she was used to, the glass tickled her flat palm and blurred with light condensation around her fingertips. Beyond that, the snow kept falling. Each unique flake tumbled down to the earth in its own unique pattern. When enough of those tiny flecks fell the vast landscape would be transformed.

Behind her, Sacha said, "I never liked snow much."

Scout scowled at her. "Thanks for ruining the mood."

Sacha held up both hands. "Hey, that's just me. I don't like the cold. Or the slop."

"You need to harden yourself," said Magash.

"Hey, I'm plenty hard."

"I think it's magical," Scout said. "All those flakes, they're so little. Fragile. I bet they'd melt right in your hand, but when you've got enough of them, they can change everything."

Ash leaned close and asked, "Metaphor much?"

"I don't know," she laughed a little. "I was just thinking out loud."

"If it works, it works," Sacha said.

Scout took her eyes off the snow and looked around the room. More Jedi had appeared; she even spotted Master Altis standing along the back wall. Nobody was speaking loudly; everyone was watching the world outside get paler and brighter with rare serenity on their faces.

Everyone except Hanna Ding.

Scout broke away from Sacha, Magash, and Ash. She slipped over to the far end of the room and sidled next to Hanna.

Without looking at her, the Arkanian girl asked, "What do you want, Scout?"

"Want? I just want to talk."

"About what?" She didn't sound actively hostile, just cold. Scout chose to take that as a good sign.

"What do you plan to do from now on?"

"What do *you* plan to do? Hide underground for years?"

"I don't know exactly," Scout admitted, "But I think that whenever Ash and Djinn leave, I'll go with them."

Hanna shifted slightly to look at her. "You're that loyal to them? Personally?"

"They're my family. Or something like it."

Hanna looked back at the snow. "You're lucky."

"I know. Believe me. But you're lucky too, in a way. You've got a second chance."

"A chance to do what?"

"I don't know exactly. I figure that's for you to decide. But you want to make up for what you've done."

"How do you know that? The Force?"

"Your face," Scout said simply.

Hanna looked back at her, eyes narrowed. "We were never friends, Scout. Why do you think you know me, what I've gone through?"

"I don't. But I do have a pretty decent imagination."

"I was never... imaginative."

"I know." Scout smirked a little. "It's how I beat you in that sparring match, remember?"

"You won because you fight dirty." Hanna didn't smile. "I've always wanted what I do to be... rational. The sure, safe bet. When the Jedi died... I think I threw in with the Inquisitors because they were *safe*. Strange as that sounds."

A lot of beings did terrible things to survive. Hanna had been one of them, though the Empire had many worse criminals. Scout wasn't sure if she, or any of the other Jedi, had really forgiven

Hanna for what she'd done to Pol Haus and Sheel Mafeen. She wasn't even sure if forgiveness mattered.

"There aren't any safe bets any more," Scout said. When Hanna didn't respond she added, "You'll have to think hard and choose the right path from now on. One step at a time."

Hanna nodded and looked back at the snow. "I'll keep that in mind."

She still felt as closed-off in the Force as ever. Scout knew she wasn't going to get much else out of the girl and stepped away. Sacha and Magash were still by the window, watching more snow bleach the floodplain white, but Ash had joined Master Altis along the back wall. The older woman caught Ash's eyes and send a soft beckon through the Force.

Wordlessly, Ash and Altis pushed off from the wall and moved for the door. Scout followed them out into the dim, windowless hallway.

"Any progress?" Ash asked.

"I don't know," Scout admitted. "I don't know what I'm supposed to be progressing *to*."

"She doesn't seem to have opened herself up in the Force any more."

"No. But it doesn't feel like she's hiding anything either. She just feels... lost."

"She's not alone in that," Altis said.

"I know. Do you sense anything, Djinn? Anything different about Hanna?"

"Like you said, she's closed herself off in the Force, and from other people. The things that must be going in that young woman's head, well, I don't envy her for them."

Scout looked down at her feet. "Ash, Djinn... Do you... *forgive* Hanna?"

They didn't respond at first. That was the last thing she wanted; stony silence wouldn't calm her confusion at all.

Eventually Altis said, "I didn't know the people she killed. If anyone's forgiveness is important, it's Jax Pavan's. But even then, it's not the most important thing."

"What is?"

"Scout, anyone can feel *bad* about something. The galaxy is full of people who feel bad about what they do but keep doing it anyway, because they're afraid of what might happen otherwise, or because they don't want to look at themselves too hard. Palpatine's Empire depends on people like that."

"You're saying what Hanna *does* is more important than what she *feels*."

"A Jedi isn't something you *are*, Scout, it's something you *do*."

"I know. You've told me that before. So what do you think Hanna is going to do?"

Altis gave a little sigh. "She's the only one who can help you with that, and I doubt even she knows."

That didn't get Scout any closer to the certainty she needed. That night, after she and Hanna both turned down the lights and dropped into their bunks, she wondered what she could say to the other girl.

She stared into the dark for a long time and couldn't come up with a thing. Eventually, she resigned herself to sleep. It ended up being the first good rest she'd had since coming to Naboo, but when she woke the next morning, she didn't feel any better.

* * *

Heavy snowfall was rare in Theed, even in winter, and when it came Sola Naberrié always tried to savor it. Padmé had enjoyed the snow as well; she remembered how eager her little sister had been to throw on winter clothes and dash out into the white courtyard of their parent's home. Sola had generally preferred to build figures out of the snow, but Padmé, she'd been one for snowball fights. Despite being the younger sister, she'd always had the better throwing arm.

What Sola loved most were cold sunny days immediately after snowfall, when the entire city seemed to gleam with fresh untrammelled white. When she woke up to find just that outside her window, she decided to take it as a good omen.

As much as she wanted to, she didn't rush out the door. That morning she made breakfast for her daughters, and made sure her husband had everything prepared for his lecture at the university that afternoon.

At once point, while Ryoo and Pooja were gulping down the last of their juice and Darred was finishing his caf, her husband asked, "Are you going to be home late today?"

Sola, standing over the sink with her daughter's dishes in hand, froze for a second, then turned and smiled at her him. "I might be. It's hard to say. You know how it is."

"I know. I was just thinking, I'm not sure how long I'll be out today either."

Sola glanced at her daughters. "I can talk to mother. She can get the kids after school."

Darred looked to his daughters. "What do you say, girls? Do you want to spend time with grandma after school?"

The girls nodded gleefully, which wasn't surprising, Jobal always spoiled them.

After arrangements were made, Ryoo and Pooja left for their school and Darred left for his. Sola finished clean-up, then put on her boots and heavy cloak and went out into the pristine snow-bright city, where she tried not to feel guilty. Sometimes you had to keep secrets from the people you loved, if only to protect them.

The snow and the sunlight really did lift her moods, even if she did have to keep shielding her eyes from the glare. When she passed the bridge over the Solleu she was surprised to find the entire river iced over and coated in white.

She went into the palace the normal way. After clearing security, two of Chief Maran's hand-picked officers took her down to the lower levels where the Jedi were kept.

Today she was set to escort a few of the newly-arrived Jedi out of the palace and show them a bit of the city. Her two guests were waiting for her when she arrived, but to her surprise, neither of them looked especially excited to be getting out of the dark after days underground. Jax Pavan seemed very distracted by something, while A'Sharad Hett had a perpetual scowl on his face.

Still, she wasn't going to let that ruin her snow-bright mood. She showed them to one of the secret exits that led from the Jedi quarters to the exterior of the palace, near the cliffs that fell down to the floodplain.

Jax Pavan had a perfectly forgettable face and she wasn't worried about taking him out in public; Hett was a very different story. Thankfully, he had borrowed a black mask from a Kubaz Jedi staying in the palace. Sola would have found the heavy black thing suffocating, but Hett put it on like masks were the most natural things in the world.

After that, Sola led them around the Palace and onto the main plaza. Citizens moved along narrow pathways cleared of snow; the rest of the open space was a broad plane of dazzling, eye-stinging white. A few children jumped into the snow to build figures or toss snowballs. Sola couldn't help a smile, even as it stung her cold face.

She did her best to explain some of the main sights to Pavan and Hett. Neither of them asked many questions and she was beginning to feel like a mediocre tour guide when they passed Padmé's mausoleum.

"Is that where your sister is buried?" Pavan asked.

"It is," Sola nodded. "It's the only thing on the main plaza built in my lifetime. Would you like to see inside?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

"It's no problem at all," Sola said. It really wasn't. Morbid as it was, she'd come to feel very comfortable in Padmé's mausoleum.

"Thank you," Pavan smiled a little. "I'll be glad to get out of the cold."

The guards nodded Sola and her companions through the doors. The chamber was empty, silent, and still, just as she had left it. The colors spilling through the stained-glass window seemed more vibrant than ever.

Hett removed the mask. His face was stiff as he walked around the stone coffin and his eyes were sad. Pavan examined the stained glass in reverent silence.

Softly, Sola said, "Usually we cremate our leaders, but an exception was made for Padmé. She was very loved by the people here."

"How did she die?" Hett asked.

Sola took a breath. "Officially, she was killed by the Jedi. But I never believed that."

"Why not?" Hett asked.

She stared at him; it was a strange thing for another Jedi to ask. "The Jedi have been very good to us. They helped free our world from the Trade Federation. And Padmé was always a strong supporter of the Order."

"What else?" asked Pavan. They were both staring at her now. She wondered if she wasn't giving off some kind of signal through the Force that only their kind knew how to read.

"Padmé was a very close friends to several Jedi," Sola said. "And... one in particular."

"How close?" asked Pavan.

"I never knew for sure." Sola shook her head. "I probably shouldn't be saying this. I know the Jedi rules about that sort of thing."

"The Jedi are dead," Hett said.

The brute simplicity of that statement stunned her. He didn't even sound mournful about it. From Pavan's expression, it stunned him too.

"Their rules don't count any more," Hett continued. "Do you know the Jedi's name?"

"Yes, but what does it matter? He's dead, isn't he?"

"We're not," Pavan said. "There's still some Jedi left."

He was looking at Hett as he said it, but Hett was looking dead at Sola. She sighed and said, "His name was Anakin Skywalker. Perhaps you knew him."

Their eyes went wide; their mouths went slack.

"You did know him," she muttered.

Pavan shuddered slightly and said, "Yes. We knew Anakin Skywalker. But he's gone now."

"I see." That hit Sola hard, and she didn't know why. She'd been assuming it for almost two years.

Hett shifted his eyes toward Padmé's image, emblazoned in stained glass. He said, "Your sister, was she pregnant when she died?"

Sola glanced at the smooth swell of her sister's belly. "We never knew who the father was. I suspected, but we never knew. She was very close to term when the end came."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Hett said. Abruptly, he took the Kubaz mask in both hands and shoved it on his face.

The conversation seemed to have abruptly ended. Sola looked at Pavan; Pavan looked away. She thought she saw the tiny diamond-sparkle of a tear of his face, caught in the colored sunlight, but she couldn't be sure.

As she led them out of the mausoleum and onto the snowy white plaza, she wondered if Hett, too, had shed a tear beneath his cold black mask.

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"Being with all of the Altisian Jedi in Naboo lulled us into a false sense of security. These people had been hiding down there for over a year and had started assuming that they'd still be there day after day. After all the running around we'd been doing, I think we wanted to believe that. We needed that sense of security too. But security was an illusion. We all knew that, but we couldn't stop believing in it, because we needed it so badly."

Darth Vader had been broken before. They knew how to put him back together again.

The firestorm at Prakith had destroyed his right leg and mangled the other. Thankfully, those were already machines, easy to replace. So, too, was his right hand, and though it had been damaged by shrapnel it had only required the replacement of two fingers and a thumb. His breathing apparatus had been damaged also, and if technicians from Prakith hadn't reached the prison ship quickly, Darth Vader would have likely suffocated.

But they were good technicians. They knew how to replace his limbs and broken respirator. They replaced his scorched and battered helmet and even made him a new black cape. When they were done the shell around the man had been almost entirely rebuilt, a perfect replica of the one he'd worn before.

And in the end, they put him right back where he began: the Emperor's throne room on Coruscant, kneeling before his master, with High Inquisitor Jerec at his side.

"You may both rise," Darth Sidious said.

They stood in unison. Half-hidden beneath the Emperor's hood, his sunken yellow eyes shifted back and forth between them.

Carefully, Sidious pronounced, "It seems you both have failed me."

"My mission was a success, my Lord," Jerec said quickly.

"Yet you failed to capture the Jedi at Sarillion."

"They only appeared briefly, at the end of the battle. Likely they came right *after* Lord Vader let them slip through his fingers."

"I did not let *anyone* slip away," Vader said firmly. "Perhaps you should ask yourself how Whiplash found them in the first place."

Jerec stiffened. "My Inquisitors made no error, I assure you."

"Then how, Lord Jerec?" the Emperor asked.

Jerec's jaw tightened. He had no explanation and never would. Vader had made sure of that.

"Perhaps you should ask Inquisitor Drayneen," Vader suggested. "She was in charge of their care."

"Did your apprentice survive, Lord Jerec?" asked the Emperor.

"She did, and with less injuries than Lord Vader," Jerec said defensively. That was true enough; Drayneen had only lost her lower legs, which were easy to replace. It was also true that the rest of the Inquisitors Drayneen had tasked with guarding the prisoners had been killed.

"What does she say for herself?" Sidious asked.

"We've found no way the Whiplash could have traced her to Prakith. We have to assume the leak came from somewhere else."

He said it with a hint of accusation, but everyone in the room knew there was no way to prove anything.

The Emperor shifted his yellow eyes to Vader. "Tell me, my apprentice, what steps have you taken toward finding the escaped Jedi?"

"I *have* found them," he said. He was most gratified when the Emperor's eyes widened a little in surprise.

Impatiently, Jerec asked, "Where are they? And how did you track them?"

"I'm not as careless with my apprentices as you, Lord Jerec. The escaped Jedi took Inquisitor Ding with them, and she has reported their location to me."

"You sent her with them? Was this before, after, or while you were failing to kill Jax Pavan, *again*?"

"Before, Lord Jerec. I make sure to plan for all eventualities."

It was a lie, but it was close enough to the truth to pass. His plan, decided before even leaving for Prakith, had been simple: Allow the Jedi to come, allow the prisoners to escape, and track them to whatever Jedi base they ran to. Hanna Ding was to surrender and throw herself at the reliable mercy of the soft-hearted Jedi. His only worry had been Ding herself, but the girl had not faltered after all.

He was, in fact, impressed by her ingenuity. The Jedi did not fully trust her conversion and had kept her under surveillance. While unable to access a transceiver on her own, Ding had implanted a Force-command in the mind of a young officer in the Royal Security Forces tasked with looking after the Jedi. Just after returning to Coruscant, Vader had received a message composed by Ding, and sent from a secure RSF communications console.

Everything had gone according to plan at Prakith except for two things: the survival of Jax Pavan and the shocking appearance of A'Sharad Hett.

Anakin Skywalker had never known what to make of Master Hett. They had been eerily alike in some ways, totally different in others. He'd felt that Hett, despite being raised a savage Tusken, had understood his pain and anger at losing a parent better than any other Jedi ever could. The Hett he'd known had come to peace with his own loss, more or less, and renounced the need for revenge. With that typical Jedi mercy, he'd forgiven Anakin when he confessed to slaughtering the Tusken tribe instead of reporting it the Jedi Council as they both knew he should have. After that, Skywalker and Hett had shared a rare, unspoken trust.

But that was all a long time ago.

Vader believed that he could have easily taken either Pavan or Hett alone. He had the strength and the willpower to kill either. But when the two ghosts from his past appeared before him together, sabers blazing, he'd been caught unprepared. Even then, he'd come agoniz-ingly close to defeating both those ghosts and putting Anakin Skywalker behind him for good.

Unfortunately, that was about to get much harder.

"Lord Vader," the Emperor asked, "Where have the Jedi run to?"

He stared at Sidious, right into those awful yellow eyes, and said, "Naboo."

Those eyes widened little more. Weathered white lips tightened, then relaxed, then curved upward in a gently sadistic smile.

"Then you must go, Lord Vader."

Jerec, oblivious to the significance of it all, said, "My Lord, I insist on going as well, as I should have gone to Prakith from the start."

"Oh, don't worry, Lord Jerec." The Emperor kept his eyes on Vader. "I was planning to send you both."

Jerec looked mollified. "I'd like to take a few appren-tices along as well."

"As you like. Lord Vader, *where* on Naboo are these Jedi hiding?"

"They are being sheltered by Queen Apailana herself, Master."

A wicked yellow-toothed grin spread on the Emperor's face. Somewhere under those robes, his sickly body shook with laughter. "Ah, those children... They've always been so idealistic, haven't they, Lord Vader?"

"Yes, my Lord," Vader growled. "It seems they have joined a much larger group of Jedi. Inquisitor Ding reports nearly two dozen were already there."

"Two dozen?" Jerec echoed. "Are they part of Altis' group?"

"They are."

"Then it is imperative we wipe them *all* out."

"Oh, I think you shall," Darth Sidious said. "Lord Vader, muster the five-hundred-and-first. I believe Vader's Fist will be quite suitable for this mission."

"You'll be launching a full assault?" Jerec frowned, then added, more politely, "It seems, my Lord, this situation might require a special... delicacy."

He was certainly right. Naboo was not Bavinyar or Gibadan, nor was it Caamas. Naboo was the Emperor's own homeworld, and any show of violent disloyalty to the New Order would be a huge personal embarrassment to the Emperor.

However, a queen who sheltered dozens of Jedi could not be permitted either.

"Prepare the five-hundred-first for a tactical strike," the Emperor told Vader. "They are to remove the queen and the Jedi sympathizers in her government. A new, more compliant one will be installed in her place."

"Where will we find a new queen?" Vader asked.

"Oh, if there's a throne, there's always someone who wants to sit in it," Jerec said. "It's simply finding the right person."

"Indeed." Darth Sidious smiled, "Furthermore, we do have certain... *experts* to consult."

* * *

The ceremonial hall inside Imperial Palace seemed bigger than the parade ground on Anaxes. It might have been an illusion, helped along by the high steepled roof, the vast windows that looked out on Imperial City, the high risers on either side of the walk that were filled with soldiers and officers gathered to watch.

Mostly, though, it felt big because only three men stood on the vast open floor, facing the Emperor's dais in the far distance, with thousands of eyes upon them.

Octavian Grant had been riding a high of confidence since Sarillion, but even he had to admit this was a little much.

He stood at the center of the line. Griff was on his right, struggling to keep the boyish ebullience off his face. Dodonna was on his left, looking old and tired and frankly miserable.

But when the Imperial anthem started playing, they all snapped to attention and started walking across the hall. The anthem played

on for almost five minutes until they crossed the yawning space and came before the Emperor. Palpatine was hunched in his scarlet metal chair, body draped in black robes, head hooded. On his right stood Admiral Screed in full dress uniform, chest heavy with medals. On his left, the black figure of Darth Vader.

Grant had never seen Palpatine in the flesh since the Jedi coup attempt two years ago. He'd seen holos, but the depth of his Emperor's disfigurement struck him for the first time. The man's skin was chalky-white, his gnarled hands grasped the arms of chair like knobby spiders, his face looked like the wax of a melting candle, and the dim yellow of his eyes like dying flames.

Grant didn't think about dropping to one knee and bowing his head. He simply *did*. It was like an invisible hand had shoved him toward the floor, and when he glanced beside him he saw Dodonna and Griff had done the same.

Then a voice, sickly but somehow booming, proclaimed, "We are gathered here today to witness the bravery and devotion of three of our best men. At Sarillion they faced down three of our most nefarious enemies and exterminated them. From this day forward we shall all remember their victory.

"These are the men upon which the New Order is being built. These are the ones who will deliver safety, security, justice, and peace to the entire galaxy.

"Rise and receive the Azure Cross, Captain Amise Griff."

The young man rose smoothly to his feet. Grant watched his boots step up the short stone steps to the dais and glimpsed him bowing low to his Emperor. Then he saw Admiral Screed, temporarily bereft of cane, hobble forward a few steps to pin the medallion on Griff's chest beneath his rank badge. The captain went back down the stairs but remained on his feet, facing his Emperor.

"General Jan Dodonna," the Emperor called.

Dodonna stood. He walked up to the Emperor, bowed, and turned to Screed. Grant thought he saw a moment's hesitation on the admiral's disfigured face, but then Screed pinned the medal on

Dodonna's chest, beneath the rank badge and right next to the Holt Cross they shared.

When Dodonna went down the steps, the Emperor called, "Vice Admiral Octavian Grant."

It was like an invisible hand pulled him up too. He felt strangely disembodied as he walked up to the Emperor and bowed.

Before he could turn to Screed, Palpatine said, "In reward for your service at Sarillion, you are hereby promoted to the full rank of fleet admiral. Congratulations, Octavian Grant."

Grant blinked, stared. A stupid smile came unbidden to his face. He scrunched his lips back into a straight line and said, "Thank you, my Emperor."

Then, like a puppet on a string, he found himself turned to face Screed. The man reached out and plucked Grant's rank badge off his chest with a black-gloved hand. He replaced it with another: twelve squares of red and blue instead of five. Then Screed pinned the gleaming Azure Cross on his chest.

And, like the others, Grant went back down the stairs. In impeccable unison, they all snapped a salute. The men lining the stands were finally allowed to cheer and clap. The band started playing the Imperial anthem again.

While it played, they marched as one across the long broad floor until they reached the other end and exited the convocation hall.

As soon as they stepped into the small vestibule, Griff's shoulders went slack with exhaled breath. He spun on Grant and said, "Admiral, I want to thank you for this honor. Without you, I'd have never had this chance."

"You were doing your duty, nothing more," Grant patted his shoulder. Dodonna was turning away, probably looking for the quickest route out of the building.

Before Grant could say anything to Dodonna, a black-gloved hand touched his shoulder. He turned around to see two soldiers in the polished black armor of the 501st Legion.

"Admiral Grant," the clone said, "You are requested for a private audience."

He swallowed and said, "Of course. Lead the way."

As they marched him through private hallways he convinced himself not to panic. Even if Vader, or the Emperor, or someone else, wanted him, there was, logically, no reason to start worrying. The Emperor wasn't about to give him a medal *and* a promotion only to take that and more away. If anything, they were probably going to pull him out of Farstine, finally, and give him a more worthy command.

He wondered where he would end up. There were still parts of the Outer Rim to be pacified; the Western Reaches were still chaotic and Adar Tallon hadn't completely finished off the Sy Myrthian rebels. He wanted to keep fighting somewhere.

The 501st clones showed him into a small private room with broad windows looking out on Imperial City. His first thought was that it looked surprisingly casual: Terrinald Screed was sitting in a soft chair, across a low table from another human with a colonel's badge. A third chair, back to the window, sat invitingly between them.

Then he saw Darth Vader and High Inquisitor Jerec, two ominous black-robed figures on their feet and looming behind Screed's chair.

He snapped a salute. "Admiral Grant, reporting as ordered."

"No need to be formal," Screed said. "Sit down, please."

Grant nodded and walked over to the open chair. He tried hard not to look at Vader and Jerec and instead turned his attention to the colonel. He was a tall man with short-cropped hair gray hair that stood in contrast to his dark brown skin. His face- its strong chin, broad cheek-bones, small dark eyes- were familiar to him.

"Congratulations on your award, and your promotion," the colonel told him.

"Of course, ah-" He groped for a name, found one. "Colonel Panaka, isn't it?"

"That's right," Panaka nodded.

Reluctantly, Grant looked over to Screed and the two black-robed Force-users behind him. "Well," he said, "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"A very important mission's come up, Admiral," said Screed. "I've discussed it with Lords Vader and Jerec and they believe you should play a part in it."

"Do they now?" He tried very hard to keep his eyes on Screed's face.

"We've recently learned of a Jedi stronghold located in the Chommell Sector. Naturally, it needs to be destroyed."

The Chommell Sector was right next door to the Ryndellian. He asked, "Am I to be sent back to Farstine?"

"Oh, no," Screed said. "We're still deciding where to place our newest fleet admiral. However, we *are* sending Captain Griff and his ships back. On their way to Farstine, they'll be stopping by Naboo."

"Naboo?" Grant blinked. Naboo was the Emperor's homeworld. It was also a well-known and well-populated planet. "If there are Jedi on Naboo, they may be difficult to deal with them."

"The Emperor is aware of the political complications," Darth Vader said. "Lord Jerec and I will be leading the five-hundred-first and a team of Inquisitors to exterminate the Jedi and depose Naboo's queen."

"The *queen*?" He blinked again. "I, ah, assume there is a plan to do this in a way that does not attract undue attention."

"I will be planning the attack," Panaka said. "I used to be chief of security for Queen Amidala. I know Theed and the Palace's defenses better than anyone."

Yes, that was why Grant remembered his face. He'd been all over the HoloNet fifteen years ago. "You helped defeat the Trade Federation blockade of the planet, didn't you?"

"That's right, and I don't need to remind you that the Naboo crisis brought down the Valorum government. We don't want to invite that kind of instability, which means we have to deal with this situation in a much more subtle matter."

"A team of commandos instead of an army," Grant muttered.

"If that." Panaka leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "Before any attack is launched I'm going to meet with Queen Aipailana personally and see if I can convince her to surrender the Jedi."

"Do you think that's likely?"

"No, but I want to try. The Naboo have a history of electing young women to lead them because they value youthful idealism. Queen Amidala was naive enough to ignore the Trade Federation's threat. She nearly lost her world. Apailana was a baby during those events and she grew up idolizing Amidala. She's been sheltering Jedi, which proves she's just as naive."

Grant wondered how all that Naboo naivety squared with electing a senator as wily and ruthless as Palpatine, but held his tongue.

"Then why speak to her at all?" Jerec asked. "We stand a risk of tipping our hand. We don't want to give the Jedi a chance to escape *again*."

"Naboo is still my homeworld," Panaka said stiffly. "Its queen might be a fool but I don't want to see it harmed."

Jerec sneered. "Your sentiment isn't the issue, Colonel. Our goal is exterminating those Jedi."

Screed shifted in his chair and said, "The ultimate command of the mission belongs to Lord Vader. He has the final say."

All attention fell onto Vader. The man's black-armored head dipped for a second, then rose again. His deep voice said, "Colonel Panaka will offer the queen the chance to surrender. If she does not, her life is forfeit."

"Then it's decided." Screed lightly slapped a metal thigh. "Lord Vader, I believe you wanted to leave as soon as possible."

"That is correct."

"Then it's best to get ready. Admiral Grant, our guards will escort you back to Captain Griff. He's already being briefed separately."

Grant rose from his chair; his legs felt surprisingly weak. He hadn't expected this, hadn't planned for it, and certainly didn't want to actually *go* on this mission, not after he'd just gotten what he'd wanted for so long. Force-users were always more trouble than they were worth,

But for better or worse, he was a soldier of the Empire, and that meant he'd do as he was told. He saluted, then eagerly left the room.

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"The revelation about I-Five's origins pretty much killed all my thought of fleeing. It wasn't just that I wanted to find out the truth of it all. It was also a reminder that I had no place else to go. Jax and I-Five had become my life; everything else had been erased. I realized that staying with them was all I could do, even if I sometimes felt like a side player in their big drama."

Because they had to know more, they once again joined Thracia in the dark.

They sat in the same positions as before, Thracia between Jax and I-Five, all of them facing the flickering candle.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" she asked.

Jax watched I-Five carefully. The droid nodded and said, "I have to find out how I became what I am."

"All right. Five, I'd like to touch your mind for a moment. Is that all right?"

"Do it," I-Five said. He sat straight and closed his eyes, like a Jedi in meditation.

Thracia reached out and placed both hands on I-Five's head, then closer her own. Jax could sense the Force passing between them, but he could gather no more than that. They both seemed frozen in place. The only motion came from the mechanical rise

and fall of I-Five's mock-human chest. Thracia didn't seem to be breathing at all.

He felt the Force connection between them surge, then die just as fast. Thracia's eyes popped open and she gasped for breath.

As for I-Five, he opened his own eyes, very slowly. He looked at Thracia, then at Jax, like he was seeing them for the first time.

"What is it?" Jax asked. "What happened?"

Slowly, I-Five said, "I remember... more."

"Like what?" When I-Five didn't respond, Jax looked at Thracia, but she was no more forthcoming.

I-Five's posture slackened. He looked at mechanical hands sheathed in pink synth-flesh and flexed his fingers.

"These used to be different," he said. "They used to be... green."

"Lath Melray's," Jax said.

"He put... *I* put himself into me. Into my processor. My 5YQ body. He was old. Sick. Dying. But he found the strength..."

"Why did he do it?"

"I wanted to make sure," I-Five whispered, still staring at his hands. "I'd thought all along that it would work, but I never... I never *tested* it. I was afraid to."

"Was... Were you afraid it wouldn't work, that you would die?"

"They said Melray was a hermit, a crazy being... The Nemoidians, even the other Jedi. I wasn't sure they were wrong."

"Not *all* Jedi," Thracia said firmly.

Jax couldn't bring himself to think of I-Five as one in the same with his long-dead Nemoidian Jedi. He couldn't. The I-Five he'd known was a *person*, complete and unique as anyone he'd ever known. His best friend in the whole galaxy was about to dissolve in front of his eyes and become something totally different.

If that happened, if this dead Melray somehow erased the I-Five he'd known, he didn't think he'd ever be able to forgive the new creature that would be formed. It wasn't a very *Jedi* thought, but there it was.

Jax didn't even know what to *call* the being in front of him, so he simply asked, "Do you remember my father?"

"Of course," he said quickly, no hesitation. "I think, when he started modifying my processor, he must have hit on something, must have unlocked the parts of... of *me* that were hidden away. And *you*, Jax, you unlocked even more. That's how you starting finding me in the Force. And Master Cho Leem..."

"Call me Thracia," the old woman smiled. "That's what Melray did. What should we call you?"

The being stared down at his hands. His mouth hinged open but he didn't answer. He couldn't.

"Master Cho Leem," Jax said, "When you reached into his mind, did it feel like there was one person in there or two?"

"I still remember everything," the other man insisted. "Lorn. Drongar. You. Den. Nick Rostu, Pol Haus, Xizor, Laranth, everything. It's not gone, it's still here!"

Looking at the droid, Thracia nodded. "What I felt was... something whole. When Melray's spirit entered I-5YQ it melded into the very circuitry and metal of its processor. What Melray became... is right in front of us."

"Amazing," Jax breathed. Even as his mind struggled to comprehend what was friend was becoming- what his friend had always been- the Temple-trained Jedi inside of him marveled in Lath Melray's accomplishment.

Thracia sensed his meaning. "Essence transfer is normally thought of as a Sith skill. They've used it out of anger and desperation, forcing the souls out of living bodies in order to cheat death. Melray was never an angry being. He wasn't afraid of death. He just wanted to discover all he could."

"So what are you saying? That is not a Dark Side skill, not if you don't use it in anger?"

"Vergere used to say that intention determined morality, not the action in itself." Thracia shrugged. "I've never quite believed that. You can justify anything that way. But what Melray did, I can't call evil. He didn't harm anyone with what he did and it wasn't for selfish motives, believe me. I knew him. I studied under him. No, he was never dark. Just... curious."

"Did you really think he could pull off something like this? Did he try to teach it to you?"

"I knew this was an interest of his for a long time. He taught me how to merge minds with other beings, to *bridge* them, like I did with you two before."

"When we did it then, it almost felt like I was being pulled out of my body and into I-Five's."

"Our bodies are vessels for something greater. That's a tenant for all Jedi, even rogues like Melray."

"Do you have the power to move him out of that droid body and into a real one?"

He could sense her hesitation, see it on her face. Before Thracia could find a response, the man said, "Don't try. Please."

They stared at him. He finally tore his eyes from his hands and looked back at them. "There's no way to know what would happen. What kind of... person would come out of this body. I need... I need to think. I need to... decide."

"Decide what?" Jax asked softly.

"What I *am*, Jax." The droid's voice cracked. "These memories from Melray, they're in me, they're real, but they're so scattered..."

"You still have all your other memories," Jax reminded him. "You have everything that came *after* Melray."

"I know, Jax. They're as real as they ever were. But I can't ignore Melray. He's inside me. I *am* him."

"Are you? Are you *not* I-Five anymore?" Jax asked. He was afraid of the answer but had to hear it.

The droid looked back down at his hands, flexed his fingers. "I'm... both. I'm two people. How can I be two people? I'm a *droid*. I'm not supposed to be any person at all."

"You are," Jax said. "You have been since before I met you. And you're still that person."

"Am I? Really?"

"I hope so," Jax said, then added, "I can't figure it out for you, though. You have to *choose*. At the end of the day, that's all we can do, even when we've lost every-thing, even when it seems like all

the choices are imposs-ible. Do you want to be I-Five or Lath Melray?"

"I'm not Lath Melray. Not any more."

"Then are you still I-Five?"

The droid looked back up at Jax. Their eyes met. Something in that synth-flesh face went weak, like it was trying to cry, but that body had no tears to shed.

"Choose," Thracia said softly.

The droid's hands balled into fists. His eyes did not leave Jax's.

"Call me I-Five," he said.

"I'm glad," Jax said, though words could hardly say it all. At that moment, though, he knew they didn't need to. He could sense I-Five before him, bleeding turmoil into the Force, and for the first time, he thought that I-Five could feel him too.

Slowly, sadly, his friend smiled.

* * *

Sola Naberrié was at home, helping Ryoo and Pooja out of their winter clothes after their return from school, when she was summoned to the queen's private meeting room.

That kind of short notice never meant anything good, but she was still surprised when she walked into the queen's chamber to see Apailana in white robes and face-paint behind her desk, Sio Bibble seated in front of her, and Colonel Quarsh Panaka in his olive-green Imperial uniform and cap, with his chair angled to face them both.

"Colonel," she said, putting on a smile. "I had no idea you were here. Welcome home."

"Thank you, Counselor," Panaka smiled, but not with his eyes.

"I apologize for the delay, Your Majesty," Sola said as she took the open seat between Apailana and Panaka.

"It's all right, I know you were with your daughters," the queen said.

Sola angled herself to face Panaka. The man had been a loyal security chief to her sister, and she could never forget that, but Panaka was also a staunch loyalist to Palpatine, and had been since

he was a mere senator. Despite the dangerous shape the new government had been taking since the end of the Clone Wars, that loyalty hadn't seemed to have wavered.

Still forcing a smile, she said, "Well, Colonel, can I ask what brings you back to Naboo? I'm sure it must be very important."

"I'm afraid it is. We've received reports that a Jedi enclave has been established in this sector."

Like everyone else in her family, and politicians galaxy-wide, Sola had been trained to keep a good sabacc face. She added a little distress to her voice and said, "That's terrible. Do you know where the Jedi might be hiding?"

"That's undetermined at the moment."

"How do you know the Jedi are in the Chommell Sector?" asked Sio Bibble.

"I'm not privy to the details, but I've heard the Inquisitors have recently traced a Jedi terrorist cell here. I've heard they're being led by a Master named Djinn Altis."

"Ah, yes, the Inquisitorius," Bibble said. "The Emperor swaps out one batch of scheming Force-users to replace them with another. Do you really think we can trust them, Colonel?"

It was a good piece of bait on Bibble's part. He could probe how much of a Palpatine loyalist Panaka really was, while playing the anti-Jedi paranoia card to shield him from accusations of treason.

Unfortunately, Panaka also had a good sabacc face. He said, "I'm simply an officer, Counselor. I follow orders and right now the Emperor has tasked me to investigate the presence of Jedi in our sector."

"Do you have any reason to believe they're hiding on my world, Colonel?" Aailana put a convincing tremor of fear into her voice.

"Not directly, Your Majesty, but we all know that Naboo is the heart of this sector. If those terrorists were to hide anywhere, this is the place. And since this is also Palpatine's homeworld, it's a logical place for them to attack."

"Do you expect violence?" Sola asked.

"The Jedi bring it with them wherever they go. Our orders are to find their nest and exterminate it," Panaka said darkly. "We won't

be giving them a chance to surrender. We also won't be lax on anyone aiding Jedi. Anyone helping them will be considered traitors and treated accordingly."

"Perhaps you should ask the Gungans," Bibble said. "There's plenty of places to hide under the water."

Panaka seemed to consider it. "How have relations with the Gungans been recently?"

Bibble blew a little sigh. "There are ups and downs, as always. You know Boss Nass, Colonel. He is a... temperamental being."

"Frankly, he's been acting secretive of late," Sola added. "There could be any number of reasons for that, though."

"Yes," Panaka nodded. "As you said, I *do* know Boss Nass..."

It made her feel sick, shifting suspicion to the Gungans. Like Amidala before her, Apailana had put great effort into sharing the planet with its native race. Siccing the Imperials on them would ruin relations for decades.

But the Gungans had no Jedi stashed away, and they did, and protecting those Jedi was the highest priority for all three of them.

It was what Padmé would have done.

"Where is Captain Maran?" Panaka asked. "I'd like to talk to her."

"She is at the main hangar complex right now," Bibble said. "Though if you want for us to bring her here-"

"Not at all," Panaka smiled politely. "I'll go see her. It's been a long time since I visited RSF headquarters."

"Are you feeling nostalgic, Colonel?" Sola asked.

"A little. I don't get back to Naboo very often."

"I'm sure that after spending so much time on Imperial Center, Theed must look quite small."

"It does," he said, "But it's still home."

"Is there anything else you need, Colonel?" the queen asked.

"I came here to search for the Jedi, Your Majesty, and to warn you. After what they did to Senator Amidala, you need to be especially careful. Counselor Naberrié, you should be careful too. They may go after the rest of Amidala's family."

"I trust my security team," Aपालana said. "Many of my lieutenants still speak well of the man who trained them."

"I'm just glad I was able to serve." He smiled back. It still didn't reach his eyes. "Before I go, Your Majesty, I just wanted to ask you one last time. Are you certain you haven't seen any signs that Jedi might be hiding some-where on this planet?"

Aपालana appeared to consider for a moment, then said, "I've had no reason to think so."

"All right," Panaka said, "That's all I wanted to know."

He rose from his chair. So did Sola and Bibble. Before stepping for the door, Panaka tipped his cap to the queen and said, "Thank you for finding the time to see me, Your Majesty."

"I always have time for a son of Naboo," Aपालana said. "Thank you for coming, Colonel."

And then he walked through the doors and was gone.

Bibble spun on the queen, fast for an old man. "How much do you think he knows?"

"We've taken every precaution," Aपालana said. "Raiella won't betray anything either."

"Your Majesty, I was here when the Trade Federation invaded. I stayed behind and had to deal with Nute Gunray and his disgusting minions. That was awful, but it could have been much worse, because Gunray was at least pretending to obey Republic law."

"And now?"

"Palpatine *is* the law, as awful as that it. If he finds any reason to suspect we have Jedi, he will crush us."

"I can't believe that. This is his homeworld. A military action here would be a huge public embarrassment."

"Palpatine controls the press. They say what he tells them to."

"That's not true," Sola said. "People all around the galaxy heard about Bavinyar."

"Even more just heard about Sarillion."

"We can't afford to be rash," Aपालana said. The young woman seemed calmer than either Sola or Bibble. "We need to talk with Master Cho Leem and the other Jedi. Even *if* they decide to leave, I don't want to move them when Panaka is still on-planet."

"Agreed," Sola said. The colonel was a smart man and he knew Naboo's security arrangement better than anyone except Raiella. If they tried to sneak Jedi out he'd spot it.

"Panaka arrived in a hyperspace-capable shuttle," Bibble said, "But he might have backup close by."

"Then we must call the Jedi now," Apailana said. "If they decide to move, they have to be ready to do it the moment Panaka leaves."

"I'll find Master Cho Leem," Sola said, and hurried out the door.

When she entered into the marble hallway she stopped, for just a second, and wondered if she would ever see her daughters again. Then she kept walking.

* * *

In Octavian Grant's opinion, *Majesty's* bridge felt much too crowded.

Normally he would have given Captain Griff a comfortable berth as the younger man moved in a loop around the deck, checking on each lieutenant, making sure every station was ready for Panaka's transmission. Now, though, he hovered right behind the man's back and occasionally made his own recommendations to the crew, which probably annoyed Griff, but the captain did a good job of hiding it.

He was doing everything possible to keep away from the center of the bridge. They stood there in the aisle between crew pits like black harbingers of death; none of the crew beneath them dared look up and risk catching their eyes.

They needn't have worried about that in the case of High Inquisitor Jerec, nor, he supposed, Darth Vader in his shiny black mask. They did have to worry about the passing gaze of the other two Inquisitors Jerec had brought along.

One was a thickly-built Falleen male named Kuthara. Like Jerec, he was dressed in Inquisitors' red-and-black robes. The other was Drayneen, a human woman in a tight all-black jumpsuit. Her face would have been stunning if not for the dark scar that cut diagonally across her face. Everything below that would have been

stunning too, if not for the fact that her legs stopped just short of the knee. She stood on long, thin mechanical limbs that were jointed in two places like a manka cat's and ended in four long, razor-sharp toes. They were probably good for running, but when contrasted with the attractive woman *above* the knees, the whole combination struck Grant as grotesque.

Darth Vader and the Inquisitors didn't seem to be talking among themselves. They didn't seem to be doing anything except standing there and looking intimidating.

At once point, Grant and Griff stopped in front of the forward viewport. *Majesty* and the other three destroyers sat in the middle of black space light-years from the Naboo system or anywhere else.

As they looked at their reflections, Griff asked, "Did the colonel give us a timetable, sir?"

"None. He said he'll call the moment he gets back to his shuttle. One way or the other."

"I've reviewed the colonel's summary of Naboo's defenses. It seems like we could occupy the whole planet with our current force. The Trade Federation didn't have much more when they took the planet."

"We're explicitly *not* imitating the Federation, Captain."

"Of course, sir. I didn't mean to compare us to them."

It was a perfectly valid comparison to make, but an impolitic one, especially with the Emperor's enforcer right behind them. He wondered what Vader *was* beneath all that black armor. Some said a Jedi. Others said some strange cyborg like Grievous. More outlandish rumors said he was the deranged clone of a long-dead Force-user, and others a resurrected member of an ancient Jedi splinter sect known as 'Sith'.

Half of Grant wanted to know. The other half wanted to learn as little about Darth Vader as possible.

Grant tried to concentrate on the blackness between stars and nothing else. He was almost getting somewhere when the communications lieutenant called, "Sirs, we're receiving a signal."

Griff and Grant both hurried over to the station as fast as dignity would allow. To Grant's surprise and relief, none of the black figures moved to join them.

A blue holo appeared in front of them: Colonel Panaka from the shoulders up. He said, "Admiral Grant, are all forces in position?"

"They are. What's your report?"

"Queen Apailana denied all knowledge of Jedi on Naboo."

"The she's signed her death warrant."

"It appears so," Panaka said gravely. "I'm sending my coordinates now. Drop out of hyperspace at exactly this point. Jam all transmissions and deploy assault teams immediately."

"Understood," Grant nodded. "We'll see you in a few minutes, Colonel."

The holo shut off. Grant turned to the center of the bridge, but Darth Vader and his black-cloaked cronies were already on their way out.

When they stepped through the blast doors, every crewman on the bridge seemed to exhale at once.

"All right, Captain," said Grant, "Run your final checks. Let's get this over with."

* * *

For days, A'Sharad Hett has stewed beneath Naboo Palace. It was not that he doubted the course laid in front of him. He was not afraid to face the Jedi and tell them he was leaving.

He knew what had to be done; he was simply unsure of how to do it.

He ran through different possibilities in his head. Neither Pavan nor the old Masters would help him track down and kill Darth Vader. He briefly wondered if Magash Drashi might be willing to help (she had a hardness in her, and a warrior's mindset) but he dismissed that too. She was crippled, half-trained, and too loyal to Pavan.

He had no choice but to do it all himself. He was pondering options such as hunting Vader or setting a trap when Sola Nabberrié appeared and summoned Kina Ha, Thracia Cho Leem, and Djinn Altis to a meeting with the queen. Apparently, nobody had decided to bring him into the loop.

Something unexpected had come up. None of the other Jedi seemed to know, even Pavan. Hett asked the royal security staff and none of them seemed to know either, until he found one chief who said that one Quarsh Panaka had just visited the palace. Panaka, who had been chief of royal security for many years, and was now an Imperial colonel loyal to Palpatine.

A'Sharad Hett realized that he'd been a fool. They *all* had. He wouldn't have to come for Vader. Vader was coming for them.

And if the Empire had found them, there was one obvious way it could have happened. Once again, the Jedi had let mercy be their downfall.

Hett stretched out with the Force to sense the many beings beneath the palace. He couldn't not find Hanna Ding; as usual, she kept her Force presence shielded. Instead, he found the next best thing.

Hett hurried through the dim tunnels until he reached the sparring room. A small group, apparently unaware of what was transpiring above their heads, were watching Ran Nebr spar with Magash Drashi. Hett ignored them both and found Scout standing along a back wall.

She saw him coming and said, "Master Hett, what is it?"

"Where is Hanna Ding?"

She blinked in surprise. "I'm pretty sure she's in our quarters."

"Isn't she being watched?"

"She said she wanted to get a little rest. I-"

Hett didn't bother to hear the rest of her excuses. The girl was even softer than the other Jedi. He spun around and hurried out of the chamber as fast as he could without breaking into a run.

When he reached the room set aside for Scout and Hanna Ding, he slid the door open and stepped inside. A pale-haired head

popped up from the top bunk; milky Arkanian eyes blinked down at him.

"Master Hett?" the girl said, "What is it?"

Without saying a word, he called on the Force and pulled her off the edge of the bunk. The girl let out a yelp as she clattered down onto the floor.

"Master Hett! What's going-"

"Did you call them here?" Hett snarled. Two lightsabers, his father's and his own, clanked together as he crouched low in front of her.

Shock gave way to a stiff defiance. Ding said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Does Vader know we're here?"

"How would I know?"

He couldn't read her, even now. She was still shielding emotions. Hett did that often himself, and he knew how to break those barriers down as well as he knew how to put them up.

He'd learned how to touch minds too.

One arm lashed out. He grabbed the girl's head, dug his fingers into her scalp, and reached-

-an angry Omwati girl bearing down with red saber blazing-

-black-armored 501st soldiers pound down a narrow dirty alley-

-a sweating insensate Togruta moans in pain on an interrogation bed-

-Scout, face soft with sympathy and half-lit by a single glow-lamp as she crouches in the dark-

-steady snowfall panting a broad plain white-

-a soft touch to the shoulders of a Royal Naboo Security officer barely out of his teens, and with the touch a current of Force energy, a Force-implanted suggestion waiting to be activated once the boy is alone with a comm system-

He threw her head down to the floor. There was a cracking sound, but she moaned and tried to pick herself up again.

Hett pulled his father's lightsaber from his belt. Staring down at Hanna Ding he said, "What kind of forces does the Empire have? Is Vader coming personally?"

She moaned, "I don't know-"

"I've seen your thoughts!" he snapped. "I know what you did!"

Her face set hard in defiance as she sat upright. "I don't know who's coming. I only sent the signal."

"They should have killed you at Prakith!"

"Lord Vader knew you Jedi would show mercy."

He thumbed the switch on Sharad Hett's lightsaber. A brilliant emerald blade shot out, stopping just short of Hanna Ding's chin.

He said, "I am *not* a Jedi."

Ding stared, eyes wide, mouth cracked open.

Then the door behind them opened and Scout bleated, "What's going on?"

Ding's left leg shot up; her boot caught Hett in the side of the head. He fell against the wall and the lightsaber spilled out of his hand. Ding sprung to her feet and jumped over his prone form.

Hett pushed himself upright and turned around just in time to see Ding throw Scout against the wall and burst through the door.

"What *happened*?" Scout shouted, confused.

Ignoring her, Hett grabbed his father's lightsaber and raced out into the hall.

He could find the girl in the Force now, strong and clear. He still felt connected to her by the phantom tendrils that had reached into her mind and plucked out the truth. He could sense her desperation and panic, even feel the rasping of breath in her lungs.

He followed her down one canting hallway after another until they'd passed beyond the regions assigned to them by the queen's security. When he turned a corner to find himself staring at a dead-end he didn't hesitate. The Force still tied them together a string, and the string was pulling him up a ventilation shaft in the ceiling.

Hett was much larger than Ding, and he barely managed to squeeze his wide shoulders into the passageway. He pushed and kicked and crawled straight up, then follow Ding's trail through a set of horizontal air ducts.

He knew he was getting close when he felt the tingle of cold air on his face. At the end of the duct, the grate had already been broken off. Hett pulled himself out and half-fell three meters onto a

ledge running around the circular edge of one of the palace's many auxiliary towers.

He stood up carefully. Cold wind stung his face. Beyond the ledge, the tower plunged straight down into a c luff and the cliff plunged even further to a vast plain, its features erased by snow. The sun was smoldering some-where in the west, behind the tower. The eastern sky before him had already sunk into the violets and blues of twilight that found a mirror in the snowfields below.

He felt Hanna Ding close by, and let her string pull him just a little further.

He walked carefully along the curve of the tower until another loomed in front of him, jumped over the gap, and continued along the new tower's ledge.

When he'd followed the curve enough to see a hint of sundown, he stopped. Hanna Ding was there, back against the tower wall, face silhouetted against the smoldering end of the day. Wind tossed her long hair, obscuring her face.

"It's over," Hett said. He took his father's lightsaber in his hand again.

She turned her head to face his, but he couldn't make out her features in the gathering dark. She said, "Yes, it is. For you."

She tipped her head back as if listening for something. Hett listened too. He heard the wind and nothing else. Then he made out a low droning. He looked up at the sky and saw a few lights high overhead. They grew steadily brighter, like they were from ships plunging toward Theed from the upper atmosphere.

As the lights grew brighter the sounds grew clearer. It was a sound he hadn't heard in almost two years but remembered perfectly. Everyone who'd fought in the Clone Wars- Jedi generals, Separatist mercenaries, clone soldiers- could instantly recognize the droning engines of a LAAT/i assault gunship.

"They're here," Ding said. Her voice trembled, like she on the verge of either laughter or tears. "He's come for us."

"Vader," he said. He suddenly found himself drained of everything, even anger and dread.

Hanna Ding had given him everything he wanted, but not when or how he'd wanted it.

She looked back at him. "For a few days I didn't know if I was going to do it. Betray you to him."

"What made you decide?" he asked, staring at her dark face while the sun's last light died behind the wind-blown tangles of her hair.

"The Jedi are dead," she said. "Vader... he's the *safe bet*."

Her voice broke again. Something rattled her chest; either choked laughter or sobs.

He looked up. He could almost make out the familiar shape of the LAAT/i gunships as they dove past the palace and over the city.

"It's over," Hanna Ding wheezed. "It's *all* over."

"Yes," he said. "It is."

He didn't ignite his lightsaber. He didn't even extend a hand. He simply reached out with the Force. Instead of sending tendrils of thought into Hanna Ding's mind, he did something simpler. He grabbed her by the throat and pulled her off her feet.

The girl struggled. She clawed at the invisible fist around her throat. Her clothes and hair flailed wildly in the wind as he pulled her over the ledge. Even without touching her mind he could feel it all pouring out of her: anger, fear, panic, primal dread.

He took a moment to enjoy her suffering, then squeezed a little harder. Even against the screaming wind, he could hear her throat snap.

He let go of her. In silence, her body plunged into the snowfield far below.

He didn't bother to go back into the palace. They'd never understand what he had done, and they didn't need his warning anyway. By now, Imperial troops were probably on the ground.

He found he didn't care about it any of it any more: not the sanctimonious Jedi whimpering in their hiding place, not even the enemy soldiers who'd gun him down at first sight.

Carefully, he made his way around the exterior of the palace and into the city. A'Sharad Hett cared about one man, and there was one place he'd be sure to find him.

25

"Until we fled there, Naboo was for me what it was for most beings in the galaxy: a place you'd heard of but never been to. And like most beings I'd thought of it as a quiet, quaint, out-of-the-way place. Then Palpatine showed his true colors, and his homeworld got tainted by association. But when I finally came to Naboo, I finally learned firsthand the truth behind all those stories. This was a place that valued beauty, youth, and tradition all at the same time; a place of high ideals and stubborn resistance to change. I think the Naboo were trying to carve a little safe paradise for themselves out of an awful, messy galaxy. For some people, it must have meant the perfect home."

The snowy rooftops and streets of Theed shone silver in the moonlight. The window of the queen's private meeting chamber looked out on Palace Plaza, its fine arches and domed buildings. From that viewpoint, Theed appeared to have quietly settled into another peaceful winter night.

Then Sola Naberrié saw the first flashes of battle in the distance and turned away.

A holographic map of the city glowed above the queen's desk, displaying the position of RSF forces and suspected Imperial landing sites. The Queen and Sio Bibble stood around it, as did Raiella and the three old Jedi Masters with whom, not ten minutes before, they'd been plotting an evacuation.

It was all too late now. As Sola stepped up to the desk Raiella was pointing out red circle-marks on the map, "Your Majesty, we've confirmed landings at these positions. RSF is moving to intercept."

"What kind of weapons do we have at our disposal?" asked Sio Bibble.

"All the flash speeders on normal night patrol, plus heavy Gian speeders from the palace garage. So far the Imperials have just landed infantry."

"They're probing our defenses before they send in something bigger," Master Altis suggested.

"Very likely" Raiella nodded. Before she could say more her comlink buzzed. The woman stepped away and began speaking into it, quietly but fast.

Sola looked back out the windows. The light of fire-fights bounced up from city streets. She saw the engine-flares of a circling LAAT/i gunship.

"Why don't they attack the palace directly?" she muttered, half to herself.

"They know this place is defended, and they know we have Jedi," Bibble said. "Besides, even Palpatine would hesitate before bombing the palace. He might as well level all of Theed if he did. It would be a public relations nightmare, having to destroy your home city because they rebelled."

"Is that what this is?" Sola asked, "A rebellion?"

For a moment, everyone looked around in silence.

"You're defending your home," said Kina Ha. Sola had no idea what to make of the towering, soft-spoken Kaminoan. She seemed to be the only one who wasn't trembling in panic.

Behind her, Raiella swore loudly. At the same time, an explosive boom rippled over the city. Heads turned to the window in time to see the fireball of an explosion rising from the main hangar complex, next to the three-domed plasma refinery facility.

Stepping back to the desk and doing an admirable job of hiding her anger, Raiella said, "Your Majesty, we've lost control of the main hangar facility."

"That means the Empire can start landing more troops," Bibble said.

"And heavy weaponry," she nodded.

"What about the Queen's ship?" Sola asked.

"I don't know. I just lost my last people there. They didn't say if the Imperials left ships intact."

Sola spun on her queen. "Your Majesty, we need to get you and the Jedi into the tunnels right now. We need to retake that hangar, or at least get you in the-"

"No," Apailana said firmly. "My place is with my people."

It was exactly what Padmé would have said. Sola pressed, "Your Majesty, *please*. You heard what Panaka said. They will *kill* you when they find you."

She saw, just for a moment, a tremor of fear pass through the young woman. Then Apailana said, "I will not run from this fight. Master Thracia, *you* should get to the hangar."

The old woman, who had been silent thus far, said, "Your Majesty, it's our fault the Empire's here."

"I knew what I was getting into," Apailana said firmly.

"All of this is moot," Raiella interjected. "If the Imperials have the hangar they have the plasma extraction complex, and if they have that, they have access to the tunnels."

Sola stiffened. "Does that mean they're coming *here*?"

Raiella looked to her queen. "Your Majesty, we can collapse all tunnels leading into the Palace."

"How will the Jedi escape?"

"They'll have to go through the streets."

Apailana didn't hesitate. "Destroy the tunnels, Captain."

Raiella quickly ducked aside and began giving orders in her comlink. Sola looked at the three Jedi Masters: shrunken mournful Thracia, alien unreadable Kina Ha, and finally Master Altis, watching the holo with narrowed, alert eyes.

To Altis, she said, "You need to take your Jedi and get out of the palace, now."

"Thracia is right. We can't abandon you people."

"Her Majesty is right too. We knew this could happen. We'll accept responsibility."

Altis' face twisted in an unhappy scowl. He said, "I'll ask my people for volunteers to stay behind and protect the queen."

"Thank you, Master Altis."

"Djinn," he muttered. "Call me Djinn."

Suddenly the entire palace seemed to rumble beneath them. Sola steadied herself on the desk and looked out the window; sporadic bursts of fire continued, but she saw no big explosions.

Then Raiella stepped back into the circle and said, "It's done. All the tunnels have been destroyed."

"You'll have to escape through the streets," Sola told the Jedi.

Raiella looked back to the map. More red had appeared, clearly outnumbering the green. The frown on her face grew deeper and she said, "Your Majesty, our defenders can't keep this up much longer."

Apailana nodded. "Tell them to fall back and protect the palace."

"You'll let the Imperials have the rest of the city?" Bibble asked. "How will the Jedi be able to slip through?"

"That may be better for us," Altis said. "If the Imperials put all their forces around the palace, it'll be easier to get through the streets unnoticed."

"Captain Maran," the queen said, "Tell *all* forces to fall back and defend the palace."

Raiella nodded, and once more stepped back to relay orders.

They were obeyed instantly. Everyone watched as the green marks indicating RSF forces fled toward Palace Plaza.

"I'm going to get my people ready," Altis said. "Thracia, Kina Ha?"

Reluctantly, the old woman nodded. The Kaminoan, too, followed him out of the room.

"It's better this way," Apailana said softly. "They won't harm the rest of the city. The civilians will be safe."

"And us, Your Majesty?" asked Bibble.

The queen didn't answer. She didn't have to. Sola's chest grew tight with the realization that she was never going to see her children again. Her only consolation was that they'd be safe so long as all the fighting was concentrated in Palace Plaza.

She'd never learned exactly how Padmé died. She wondered if it had come suddenly, or if she'd had time to brace herself. She wondered if, in her last minutes, Padmé had felt this same strange combination of calm acceptance and bitter regret.

* * *

Armored landspeeders has gathered in Palace Plaza, hovering over untouched stretched of flat white snow. They sat with their backs toward the palace's broad domes and their noses and weapons bristling outward toward the streets. Other RSF soldiers had gathered on foot on the steps leading to the palace entrance. Some were preparing mounted blaster emplacements; others were piling up supply crates from who-knew-where and using them for cover.

The black-armored soldiers of the 501st Imperial Legion now filled the mouths of the streets emptying onto the plaza, most taking cover behind the edges of buildings as they waited for the order to charge.

At the moment, no one fired. The fighting elsewhere in the city had stopped. A cold silence had fallen over Theed.

Darth Vader stood at the far end of the plaza, looking down that long stretch of night-dark snow toward the Naboo landspeeders and the looming palace. He tried to remember what Anakin Skywalker had felt when he'd first seen such a grand and beautiful building. He couldn't. That memory was dead, and it should have been dead, and all the while on the voyage out to Naboo Darth Vader had been afraid that the return to this world (Padmé's world, the world that should have been home) would be a plunge into some ghost-choked hell.

No ghosts had come yet, but he knew that would change.

Looming behind him was the one new building in Theed built since Anakin's last visit: the mausoleum erected in honor of Padmé Amidala.

He hadn't even let himself look at it.

A man jogged toward him. Unlike the 501st soldiers he wore no mask that covered his face. Colonel Panaka's breath puffed out of his mouth as he came up to Darth Vader and snapped a salute.

"All our ground forces are in place, Lord Vader," he said. "Air support is standing by and ready to move on your notice. Are we ready to attack?"

Darth Vader stared down at that man without speaking. Memories reached out of the night to touch him. He remembered that same face, seen from below, looking smooth and dark and strong. It had been intimidating to a small boy fresh from Tatooine.

"My Lord," Panaka asked, impatient, "Are we ready?"

"We attack on *my* command, and mine alone," Vader said firmly. "Is that understood, *Colonel*?"

The harshness in his voice made Panaka flinch. Suddenly there was fear in his eyes. Vader looked down on a weary, pathetic little man who wanted to be any-where else.

Vader reached out with the Force, across the snowy plaza, and tried to sense the Jedi now cowering inside the palace. He could feel the collective anxiety of everyone inside, but he could not locate the presence of any particular Jedi, not even Pavan or Hett. He felt he should have; this planet was distracting him. Old ghosts, one by one, were starting to whisper to him out of the night.

It would do no good to go into battle this way.

Ignoring Panaka, Darth Vader turned his back to the palace and faced the mausoleum.

The broad stone building mirrored the architecture around the plaza well, but it lacked the excess decoration. There were no relief carvings on its face, no statues perched on the roof. Its gray stone face possessed the simple severity Padmé's tomb deserved.

He knew it was beckoning him, and he knew he couldn't fight until he faced what was inside.

Without a word, Darth Vader began walking toward the mausoleum. No one tried to stop him. He climbed the broad steps and walked through the heavy wooden doors.

The room inside felt bigger than he'd expected. The walls were bare; all attention was drawn to the stone coffin sitting in the center. Moonlight fell through the stained-glass image of Padmé Amidala, dressed in a soft blue gown, hands folded over the swell of her stomach, a tight ambiguous smile on her face.

Vader stopped in his tracks. The smile was *perfect*. In his mind's eye, in the memories of a dead man, he could see a thousand variations on what came next: the blossoming of a white grin, the playful pout, the bemused shaking of the head, the press of lips into a serious line as she pondered the fate of democracy.

He could see a thousand futures waiting to spring from that stained glass but none of them would come. Cold and lifeless, that glass was all that was left of Padmé Amidala. Those futures had been extinguished.

He'd destroyed them all.

Vader walked in a circle around the coffin, counter-clockwise. He reached out and touched its hard smooth surface. He felt nothing through his gloves, not even the bite of cold stone.

He would never feel anything again. Even the memories of that face started to fade the moment he looked away from the stained-glass window.

If he never looked at them again, even the pain would go away.

Part of him was relieved. The irrevocable loss was already happening. With time, the memory of Anakin Skywalker's life would fade even further, the joy and pain alike. The rest of him mourned, for the same reason.

He stood for a long time in front of the stained-glass window, watching his shadow slice through the pastel-tinted moonlight and drape darkness over Padmé's coffin.

He only looked up at the sound of boots. A man walked through the open doorway and into the mausoleum. He stopped at the opposite end of the coffin. He held a lightsaber in either hand.

"Did you kill her?" asked A'Sharad Hett, "Or did she die in spite of you?"

Vader stared. Even with the adjustment his helmet provided he could barely make out Hett's tattooed face in the darkness. He reached out with the Force and sensed anger forged into bitter resolve.

"You've come to kill me," he said, matter-of-fact.

"I should have done it on Aargonar."

Hett should have. It would have saved Padmé. It might even have saved the Jedi and the Republic, but Vader did not remember why he'd ever cared about those. He wasn't sure if he ever had, even when he was a young boy seeing Naboo for the first time.

"Where is Jax Pavan?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Two Jedi were not enough to defeat me before." Vader put a hand on the hilt of his lightsaber. "Why do you think you'll succeed now, A'Sharad?"

"I'm not a Jedi," he said.

Vader could sense it a little clearer now: the desire to set things right after so much tragedy, the knowledge that it could never be so, the *need* to bend the universe into submission, of only to revenge all the damage it had done.

He wasn't lying. Javan Pavan was still a Jedi, straight and true, despite all he'd been through.

A'Sharad Hett was not.

"Interesting," Vader said. "It seems we have much in common."

"Once. Not any more."

"You are stronger than Pavan, *harder*. You understand what must be done to secure the future." He drew his lightsaber but did not ignite it. "Join me, A'Sharad."

Hett snorted. "I'm not becoming one of your Inquisitors."

"You won't. You are much more than they are. You're more much than the Jedi made you, too. Together, we can change this galaxy."

"You? You haven't changed anything. You betrayed everyone who ever trusted you, and for what? Did you think he'd give it

power, that he'd *share* it with you? You're Palpatine's attack dog. His *pet*."

Vader was shocked by the angry condescension in Hett's voice. He grown accustomed to fear from other beings, or, from a select few like Jerec, begrudging respect.

"He made you into an *animal*, Anakin. Was it worth it? Did you get what he promised you?"

Vader's lightsaber sprung to life in his hand. "*Together*, we can overthrow the Emperor, A'Sharad. We can bring order to the galaxy on our own terms."

"*Order* won't bring them back," Hett said.

And for a moment, Vader sensed a deep and familiar pain. Like Anakin, he'd lost a parent. Like Anakin, he'd gained and lost another family.

"Will *this* bring them back, A'Sharad?"

"No," Hett said, "But at least I can fix a mistake."

Two emerald blades extended, casting green light over a fierce face. Hett leaped onto the coffin and charged.

Vader angled his saber to catch one blow, then another. With a strong kick of Force energy, he knocked Hett off of Padmé's coffin. He went tumbling onto the marble floor but was back up immediately, charging.

Vader deflected his attacks again. One green lightsaber flicked into the wall and cut steaming scorch-marks deep into stone. With two blades knocking against his own it was hard for Vader to attack, but he managed a few quick feints that sent his opponent skirting back a few steps.

Hett went on the offensive again. Vader was knocked back until his legs hit the hard stone edge of Padmé's coffin. He gave Hett a Force-push and tried to slip away. Hett swung both blades down where Vader had just been, right into the coffin's stone.

"No!" Vader thundered. He threw Hett back with an invisible hand. His body smacked hard against the opposite wall and fell, but he didn't let go of his weapons.

He ran a gloved palm across the smooth stone of the tomb. He felt the fresh cuts the lightsaber had made and was relieved to find they were shallow.

"You still love her," Hett rasped as he got to his feet.

"I killed her," Darth Vader said.

Hett stared without re-igniting his sabers. It wasn't a denial. They both understood that.

He said, "I'm going to end it, Anakin. For you. For your child. All your descendants."

Vader hadn't expected that response. He tipped his saber to the stained-glass window and the pregnant swell beneath Padmé's sky-blue dress.

"I *have* no child," Vader growled. "I killed him as well."

But Hett kept staring. His eyes had narrowed, like he was trying to make sense of something. Vader couldn't imagine what, but he was suddenly overcome by the need to know.

Then Hett's face went hard again. His lightsabers sprung to life and he threw himself forward again. Vader blocked a series of blows without stepping away from Padmé's coffin; he suddenly needed to protect it as much as himself. Hett's twin blades fell again and again like green-white lightning, and behind the lightning he felt a storm of raw anger: anger at Vader, the Sith, the Empire, the entire universe that had robbed him again and again of the people he cared about.

Vader had been a fool to look for an apprentice in weak children like Hanna Ding. *This* man would be an extra-ordinary partner.

Vader summoned the Force and shoved Hett back toward the wall. He charged forward into the open space and swung for Hett's head; as predicted, the other man dropped and swiped both blades at Vader's legs. Machine limbs pumped upward; he jumped over Hett's head and came down behind him.

For a fraction of a second they stood back-to-back. Then they pulled apart, spun, clashed swords again. Now Vader had his back to the wall, Hett's to the coffin.

Their eyes met, and in an instant Vader realized his mistake.

Hett somersaulted back, boots over head, and landed on the lid of Padmé's tomb. Blades spun green-white semi-circles in his hand as he switched grip so the blades were ready to stab downward, through the stone, through the body beneath.

Vader howled. Blue lightning shrieked across the room. Caught off guard, Hett struggled to block the attack with his weapons. Lightning surged past his blades, danced across his body, seared his skin and smoked his clothes.

Hett let out a scream and dropped one blade. Vader hurled him off the coffin's lid toward the doorway. Hett's smoking body skid across hard tile until stopping right on the threshold. He lay there, gasping for breath, moaning in pain, unable to move but still radiating that same rage in the Force.

Darth Vader walked over to Padmé's coffin and picked up the metal cylinder lying atop it. He examined it in the pastel-tinted moonlight. A'Sharad Hett fought with two lightsabers: one made by his father, and one made by himself. This was the latter.

He turned to the door. Hett was trying to push himself up. Sharad Hett's lightsaber gleamed beneath his left fist.

"You can never let go, can you, A'Sharad?"

"You're one to talk," Hett wheezed.

The flippant remark cut deep. For a moment, right before Hett arrived, Vader had managed to convince him-self that Anakin Skywalker- all he'd known, all he'd loved- was irrecoverably passed. One ghost had brought on a rush of others.

"The past is the fire we burn in." He realized the truth as he spoke it. "It forges us into what we are. We must *use* that pain to grow stronger."

"And then what?" Hett rolled onto his backside and sat up on his elbow facing Vader. "What have you *done* with your pain besides bark at Palpatine's heel?"

Vader took a step closer with Hett's saber in his right hand, his own in his left. "You do not know the power of the Dark Side of the Force. But you will learn."

"Not from you."

Hett raised his free hand, and blue lightning burst out. It caught Vader by surprise; he tried to block it with his lightsaber but some danced up his arm and sparked through his half-machine body. For a moment his respirator sputtered; weakness overcame him; he lost balance, stumbled, and barely braced himself on the edge of Padmé's coffin.

When breath returned he saw A'Sharad charging at him with both sabers in hand.

Vader swung, blocked. When Hett pulled his blades back for another attack he reared back and kicked one leg out. An iron foot took Hett right in the stomach. Vader gave him a Force-shove and sent him skidding back across the floor, through the threshold, onto the snowy mausoleum steps.

Vader was on him instantly. Hett was dazed and hurting, unable to wield both blades effectively. Vader quickly put him on the defensive, backing him toward one of the thick square pillars that held up the mausoleum's roof. He heard voices shouting around him but continued to pound Hett further and further back.

The man's boots slipped on the snow. He tumbled face-up into the white. Vader raised his blade and swung down; Hett caught his attack between his crossed sabers and tried to push back. Red and green sparked in their faces as Vader bent lower.

"If you will not join me," he warned, "You will be destroyed."

Hett's face was twisted in a rictus of pain. He couldn't respond, but Vader could feel that angry defiance surge stronger than ever.

Hett's boot snapped up and kicked Vader, right in the respirator. Breath failed him again. He stumbled back, slipped, lost balance and almost fell into the snow. Hett jumped back to his feet.

Then someone shouted, "Open fire!"

Vader looked up just as a squadron of black-armored troops began shooting.

Hett spun to face the soldiers and frantically batted back their attacks with both blades. He jumped to the side and took cover behind the closest pillar, but the soldiers didn't stop firing. Their shots tore black pock-marks in the pillar and sent cracks through its stone.

"Stop!" Vader bellowed. "Cease fire!"

Then he heard the hard clatter of a grenade hitting ground.

The mausoleum steps shuddered; light flashed and some filled the air. Vader summoned the Force and swept the air clear. The pillar was scorched, cracked, gutted, but barely holding. Hett was nowhere to be seen.

He reached out with the Force. He could still feel that anger, but he felt pain, too. Both were growing distant.

On the far side of the plaza, the fight had sparked a response. The Naboo speeders and soldiers opened fire, and the 501st responded. Explosions and laser-flashes lit up the night.

Then he noticed Colonel Panaka jogging up to him, puffing white breath in front of him. "Lord Vader, are you all right?"

"You shouldn't have interfered!" he shouted.

Panaka skidded to a halt at the base of the stairs. "Lord Vader, the Jedi was going to-"

"I had him under control!" Vader shouted. He reached out with the Force and grabbed Panaka by the neck. "You are *not* to come between me and the Jedi, is that understood? I am in command here, Colonel, *not* you!"

Panaka clawed at the invisible hand around his throat, like they always did. He gasped, "S-Sorry, sir. I was only... trying to... help..."

"You will *help* me by following orders!"

"Yes... Promise... sir..."

Vader released him. To his credit, Panaka didn't drop to his knees gasping for breath. He wavered but didn't fall.

Vader looked toward the palace. Grenades began to explode in the center of the plaza and missiles arced into the surrounding buildings. The battle had fully begun.

"Colonel Panaka," he said, "Summon three gunships. I want commando teams ready to insert into the palace through the upper levels."

"Yes, sir," Panaka said, still rubbing his throat.

"And Colonel, I want *you* to lead them."

The man nodded. "Of course, sir. No one knows the palace like I do. But sir-"

He paused, hesitated. Vader said, "What is it, Colonel?"

"Given the choice, should the queen be apprehended or killed?"

Vader had never met Apailana, but he knew she would be exactly like the woman he'd loved: young, idealistic, and ready to die for her people. It was the fate she'd chosen the moment she'd decided to shelter Jedi.

Vader turned to look at the mausoleum one more time and let the memory burn him. The past was a fire that had forged him, and made him into what he was now.

That man had no room for mercy.

"Kill her," Darth Vader said. "Kill them all."

26

"The moment we'd arrived on Naboo we'd been stuffed into the underground tunnels and carted off to hide beneath the palace. What I learned of the Naboo I learned from Sola and the security people taking care of us; I didn't get to see Theed at all. I felt restless and stir-crazy; I wanted to get out and see anything. I got my wish, of course, and it wasn't the way I'd wanted it. Without warning, we were all cast out into Theed's streets and left to fight for our lives in the snow and the cold of a bitter winter night."

The halls of Naboo's royal palace, normally a model of elegance and tranquility, had become a chaotic mess. As sounds of the battle outside drifted through its sandstone walls, its halls were filled with Jedi, RSF officers, and scattered civilians, all scrambling to be some place else.

All Scout cared about was finding two people who'd disappeared right before the disaster started: Hanna Ding and A'Sharad Hett. Pushing against the current of evacuating Jedi, she checked every room in the living quarters, the practice rooms, the viewing chamber, even the refreshers. She didn't see them anywhere, and in the chaos she couldn't find any trace of them in the Force either.

Even as she came up empty stubbornness took hold. A part of her was telling her exactly what had happened: Ding had betrayed

them somehow, Hett had figured it out. Ding had run, Hett had chased her, probably killed her.

Because she needed for something else, anything else, to have happened, she went back to search the same areas again. She was just about to head for the living quarters when Master Altis grabbed her shoulder and spun her around.

"Scout!" he said, "What the blazes are you doing? We have to get out of here, now!"

"Hanna, I have to find Hanna!" she almost shouted. "And Hett, I can't-"

"There's no time! Come!" He started steering her down the hall by both shoulders.

Scout stumbled but kept pace. Even as she retreated she said, "I have no know what happened to them! When I went to my room, I saw them, and I-"

"I know, I heard. Hett was chasing Ding."

"But what does that *mean*?"

"There's no way to know and no time to-"

She stopped, spun around and grabbed the old man by the arms, forcing him to face her. "Did she do it, Djinn? Did Hanna bring the Empire here?"

His face was long and sad; he didn't say a thing.

"Please!" She squeezed his arms tighter. "Tell me I didn't do this! *Tell me this isn't my fault!*"

He reached up and clasped her arms back. "Scout, you didn't do this."

"But Hanna... She betrayed us, didn't she?"

Reluctantly, he nodded. "It seems so, yes."

Her whole world seemed to sway; she felt ready to collapse right there. Altis held her arms tighter and said, "Don't do this, Scout! There's no *time!*"

"I trusted her," Scout said. "She *used* me. I let her do this, Djinn. I-"

"No!" Altis shook her hard. "She was here for *days*, Scout, and I didn't sense her intentions. None of us did, not even Kina Ha. She fooled all of us, not just you."

"I'm the one who brought her back from Prakith."

"Yes, you did, and you did *nothing* wrong, Scout."

"I did everything wrong! I should have- should have-"

"What, killed her? Cut her down, unarmed?"

For a moment Scout flashed back to that hot sudden rage that had overtaken her on Prakith. It had felt so *easy* then. She'd never understood all that talk about the seductive Dark Side until that moment, when she'd let all the loss she'd taken finally loss transmute to anger.

She'd rememnered, once, warning a good friend against that dark rage.

"You made a Jedi choice then, Scout. That's all that matters. What did you tell me once? We can be either the candle or the dark, we just have to *choose*."

A weird calm settled over her. In spite of everything, a weird smile settled on her face. "Actually, that was Master Yoda."

"Well," Altis puffed, "I guess even he was right every now and then."

Scout blinked, looked around the hallway. It had emptied without her noticing.

"We're late," she said.

"Time to catch up then," Altis said.

She ran down the corridor without having to be pushed. To her surprise, the old Jedi Master managed to keep up.

* * *

When the call to evacuate came down, we were all thrown from different places into the same tussle of people making their way for the hidden exits from the palace. For the vertically challenged such as myself, being thrown into a mob of taller humanoids is always an unpleasant experience. My one advantage is a decent set of lungs, so as I was pushed and pulled with the crowd I kept bellowing, "Jax! I-Five! Sacha! Magash! Jax!"

And eventually that worked. I-Five found me first, then Sacha. After that Magash and finally Jax congregated to where we were.

"What's going on?" Sacha was asking. "Is there a plan? Tell me there's a plan."

"The plan is that we all get into the streets and run for the hangar," Jax said. "Then we grab *Laranth* or whatever we can and fly. Good thing you brought the rifle."

I had one of the Verpine guns from *Laranth* slung awkwardly over my shoulder. I shifted the weight and said, "I thought the Imps have the hangar."

"There's a way inside that cuts through the plasma processing facilities. We'll try that."

"Is *everyone* heading there?" I gestured to the people spinning around us.

"Mostly," Jax said. "Some Jedi have volunteered to stay with the queen."

I didn't have to ask if the queen would be safe once we left. The Empire's judgment was never soft. Her life was in danger, just as all of ours was.

Sacha asked, "Is Apailana going to run?"

Jax shook his head. He didn't have to say any more. Loyalty, duty, we knew the rest. These Naboo were noble to a fault, just like the Jedi. I'm still amazed they produced somebody as evil as Palpatine.

Before anyone could say anything else, we heard Jax's name being called. Master Altis appeared, dragging Scout and Thracia Cho Leem behind him. Even the old woman looked flustered, but I was glad to have somebody I could look at eye-level.

"Are you coming too, Master Cho Leem?" I asked her.

"I'm not as fast as I used to be," the old woman shook her head. She looked battered and defeated and I realized then that everything she'd been building here on Naboo had just crashed around her in a matter of hours.

Then I-Five said, "Perhaps I may be of assistance."

Everyone stared at him. I think Jax and I stared the hardest; since the revelations about his past, I-Five had become stunningly taciturn and, dare I say, brooding.

I-Five looked down at Thracia. "Whatever I am, I'm still make of stronger stuff than meat-sacks like you. If you want, Master, I can give you a ride?"

"On what?" I asked. "Your back?"

I-Five blinked. "That *was* the idea."

To my surprise, Thracia started laughing. It sounded like tinkling bells. "Jax was right. You never cease to surprise... I-Five."

Looking grateful, he nodded back.

"Excellent," Altis clapped his hands. "Scout, I want you to go with Jax too."

"What?" Scout blinked. "Master, I thought-"

"Djinn," he insisted. "I'm going to hang back with Ash. No, I'm not staying behind, I just want to make sure all our people get out. You should go ahead."

Before Scout's eyes could get too sad, he patted her shoulder and said, "Don't worry about us. We'll meet you at that plasma extraction facility, safe and sound."

"Wait," Sacha said, "Where's Kina Ha?"

Everyone started looking around; the stalk-necked white Kaminoan would be hard to miss.

And indeed she was. We saw her standing at the top of one of those ornate marble staircases leading up toward the queen's rooms. She was looking down on the other Jedi with what looked (to me anyway) like a benign, peaceful smile.

"Kina Ha will be staying here," Thracia said.

"Here?" Sacha gaped. "That's suicide! Those Imps won't-"

"She knows what will happen," said Altis. "She accepts that."

"But... why?"

Altis looked up at the white figure on the steps. "She is old. Slow. And she has no one to carry her."

"But she can't just sit there and *die*," I said.

"She won't," Scout said. I saw realization in her eyes.

Altis nodded. "She'll do her part while she can."

"What is it?" I asked. "What am I missing?"

"Kina Ha has a special... gift," Scout said. "She used it at Bavinyar. It helped us then, it should help us now."

"But what about her *body*?" Sacha asked. "Doesn't Palps want to cut her up and figure out how she lived so long? We can't let the Empire have her, dead or alive."

Altis cleared his throat. "The RSF has been kind enough to gift her with a thermal detonator. When the time comes, there won't be anything left."

I think something rattled in my throat then. There was nothing I could say when faced with that kind of courage.

Magash, who'd been silent until now, said, "She's the bravest warrior of us all."

Magash turned toward the stairs and raised one fist in salute. To my surprise, others had joined her there to look down on the exodus. On her one side was Sola Naberrié, in that same blue dress and white shawl I'd first seen her in.

On the other was a young woman with her face painted white, a velvet red cloak spilling off her shoulders, and a gold metal frame around the edges of her face.

That was the only look I ever got at Queen Apailana. My first thought was how damned *young* she looked. Then she looked so damned brave.

Those Jedi and Naboo, they made quite a pair. They could even shame lesser mortals like me toward mild nobility.

It was Jax who said, "Come on, everyone, it's time to go."

There was little else to say. Altis slipped away to find Ash while the rest of us worked our way to the secret exit. As we got closer the sounds of explosions and laserfire from the plaza got louder and louder.

I guess my nervousness showed, because I-Five looked at me and said, "Are you hanging in there, Den?"

"Are you?" I asked. "Seriously, I-Five, are you okay?"

"Well, the threat of imminent destruction has a way of focusing the mind."

"Focusing on what, Five?"

"What's in front of me, Den. Not the life I used to have, the one I'm living now. The one threatened with imminent-"

"-Destruction, yeah, you don't need to say it twice." Despite it all, I smiled a little. "Glad you're with us, Five."

"Glad I am too."

An especially loud explosion sounded, too close for my comfort. "You sure about that?" I asked. "Me, I'd rather be on Rathalay, or some other place with lots of sun, beaches, oceans..."

"Well," Five said, "Beggars can't be choosers."

That was when we reached the exit. I-Five bent low and Jax helped the little old woman pull herself onto his back and wrap both arms tight around his shoulders. They looked so ridiculous I almost laughed.

And then, feeling a tiny bit better about things, we plunged out of the palace and into the cold black night.

* * *

Over the space of only a few hours, Sola Naberrié had almost resigned herself to dying.

If her thoughts wandered back to Ryoo and Pooja and Darred, to her parents already broken by the loss of one daughter, her resolve would have faltered, but everything in the palace was too frantic, and she was surrounded by beings whose bravery shamed her, most of all Apailana and Kina Ha.

It seemed impossible that the two of them, one so young and the other impossibly old, could face their fates with the same acceptance. After watching most of her fellow Jedi leave, the ancient Kaminoan had traded a knowing nod and a satisfied smile with the young queen, then walked off to the chamber they'd reserved for her in order to do whatever special Jedi magic she'd deemed worth dying for.

As for Apailana, she went to her meeting room and sat on behind her desk and waited. She'd found the time to change her appearance, keeping the white facepaint but swapping out the white robes for scarlet ones.

It was the same outfit, more or less, that Padmé had worn all those years ago, when Apailana herself had been an infant and one

brave queen had stood defiant as the Trade Federation overtook their world. It was that image of Padmé, in red robes, that Apailana had grown up with.

That bit of theater would be lost on a lot of people, but not any Naboo and especially not Sola. Apailana's devotion to her dead idol, so strong as to walk the path of martyrdom, nearly broke her heart.

Sola had almost resigned herself, but not quite, and neither had Sio Bibble. They gathered with a few of the remaining Jedi in the same meeting room. They didn't need that holomap of Theed to track the battle any more. They could see it all just by looking out the window.

By by bit, the RSF forces were falling back toward the palace entrance. The Imperial forces were constricting their noose tighter and tighter. The RSF had erected short-range portable energy shields around the heavy Gian landspeeders, which had proved an effective defense at first, but soon the Imperials had begun launching targeted mortar rounds over the tops of nearby buildings. Now most of the heavy speeders had been reduced to blackened wreckage and twisted ribbons of flame.

But the RSF was brave. Many of them took cover behind the wreckage and kept on holding back the Imperial advance with small arms and the occasional mounted repeating blaster.

Just a few hours ago Palace Plaza had been a pristine white plain of unmarred snow; now its white was torn apart by footprints, strewn with wreckage and littered with dead bodies, Naboo and Imperial alike. In the night it was hard to tell one from the other.

"They can't hold out much longer," one of the Jedi, a Duros name Ran Nebr, said. "Can you contact the leader down there?"

"Captain Maran was killed in the second wave," Sio Bibble said. "One of her lieutenants is in command now.

"Well you should tell him, or her, to get ready."

"Ready for what?" Sola asked. "Where can we go?"

"We can do what the other Jedi did," Nebr insisted. "What they're still doing. We can go into the streets and try to fight our way to the hangar."

"Can you... sense the others?" Sola asked. "I thought some Jedi could do that."

Nebr nodded. "Normally I couldn't either, not like I can now, but Kina Ha, she's doing something... extraordinary. Most of them are still alive, still out there. We have to take advantage of that."

"Take advantage of what?" Bibble objected. "I don't understand-"

"I couldn't explain if I tried," Nebr said. He looked back to the desk where Apailana sat, staring dead ahead as if in meditation.

When Nebr called her name, she asked him, "If I flee, where will I go?"

"Anywhere," Nebr said. "You can rally support to your cause."

Bibble sighed and shook his head. He'd been through all this before. She'd never seen him so tired.

But Nebr was insistent, even eager. It sparked the little part of Sola that hadn't resigned. She said, "Your Majesty, wouldn't it be braver to go out into the streets? To be killed here would be..."

She trailed off. She couldn't find the words. Apailana's eyes shifted slightly to her but she didn't speak.

Then a low roaring sound rattled the windows. Sola turned and saw a trio of LAAT/i gunships arcing over the city, vectoring from the hangar toward the palace.

"I can't believe it," Bibble said. "They're going to bomb us!"

The gunships swooped close but Sola didn't see the flare of launching missiles. Instead, just when it looked like they were about to smash into the palace's marble face, one pulled up and the other two swerved around the palace's dome.

Everyone looked around, confused. Then Bibble's comlink buzzed.

The old counselor took out his comlink and spoke into it. Thirty seconds later he pocketed it and said, "Imperial commandos have entered the buildings through the upper levels. They'll be here any minute."

For a long, long moment Sola believed the queen really would sit in her chair and wait for death, and Sola and the rest of them would die with her.

Then Queen Apailana stood up and said, "Counselor Bibble, alert the RSF. We're going out. Master Jedi, lead the way."

Bibble got his comlink back out. Nebr nodded with grim determination. As the group went for the door, Sola lingered with Apailana. The young woman took a golden hold-out pistol from her desk. The elegant little weapon disappeared inside her voluminous red sleeve.

Apailana looked up. Whatever she was in Sola's eyes made her own often.

"You can stay here, Sola. I'd understand."

"There won't be mercy no matter what we do. I just hope Darred and the children..."

"I know." Apailana touched her arm. "I'm so sorry for getting you into this."

Sola shook her head. "This was my choice. You didn't get me into anything."

"I know." Apailana smiled sadly. "I think... she would be proud."

They were both the same kind of foolish, dying for the sake of a woman already dead, but there it was, the tie that bound them, however lofty and pathetic it might be.

From the doorway, Ran Nebr called, "Come, we must hurry!"

Apailana nodded hurried for the door. Loyal to the end, Sola fell in behind her.

* * *

As they slipped through the backstreets of Theed the thunder of the plaza battle grew slowly fainter. The fight had drawn the vast majority of Imperial troops and, as planned, the Jedi's flight was mostly a smooth one.

Jax Pavan had never been in this city before. Its old streets curved and looped without any obvious order and in any normal circumstances he would have been totally lost.

But this night, he knew exactly where to go. Kina Ha's mind touched his, as it touched everyone else's, and guided them toward their destination

He knew, too, where Altis and Ash and their band were. He could feel them, winding through a different route but steadily converging on the three-domed plasma extraction complex adjacent to the hangar that was their ultimate goal. He could also feel another group, the first to slip out of the palace, closer to their goal than the other two.

Even more clearly, he could feel the beings around him: the old woman calmly reaching ahead to sense danger; Scout and Sacha, very alert; Magash, very conscious of the half-familiar lightsaber in her single hand. He could even feel I-Five, barely bothered by Thracia's weight on his back.

Because he was linked to everyone else and they were linked to him, he could feel the shock ripple through Altis' group as they came under attack.

Everyone else around him could feel it too, except for I-Five and Den, but even in the dark they could pick up the anxiety rippling through the group.

"What is it?" Den asked. "What's wrong?"

"It's Djinn," Scout said, "They're in trouble."

Jax could tell Den was straining to hear and with those ears of his he probably could have pinpointed the location of the fight.

Thanks to Kina Ha, Jax could do better than that.

He stabbed a finger at a winding street he'd never been down before and said, "This way, come on!"

He took the lead, with Magash close behind. Scout held up the rear along with I-Five. Den, slinging that Verpine rifle off his shoulder and cradling it against his chest, did the best he could to keep up with Sacha.

It took Jax three more turns to find them. His group had already managed to cross the iced-over tributary of the Solleu River that ran between the palace and the hangar, but Altis' group had gotten pinned down on a bridge. Troops from the 501st, barely visible in their black armor, converged on the arch from either side

while a shrinking circle of Jedi desperately tried to bat back their attacks.

Jax and Magash sprinted along the riverbank toward the bridge. Even as they ran he could see another Jedi go down. His dying pain rippled through the mind meld but was quickly washed away by Kina Ha's soothing touch.

Jax and Magash fell on the troops at the west end of the bridge. They'd been so concentrated on the Jedi on the bridge that they didn't see their attackers coming until it was too late. Jax and Magash both pirouetted through the crowd, nimbly bouncing black laser blasts while spinning their sabers to cut off arms and hands. Sacha quickly joined in; her blade sizzled through black armor and dropped soldier after soldier.

As for Scout and Den, they rushed to Altis' remaining Jedi and helped cover their retreat to the west end of the bridge, even as the soldiers from the east end kept firing at their backs.

Just as Jax cut down the last trooper on his side he looked up to see one of Altis' Jedi take a shot square in the back and fall. Den, awkwardly cradling the Verpine gun against his chest, fired back stray shots, none aimed to hit but good enough to make the enemy duck.

"Thank you for the help," Altis breathed as he came up on Jax.

Jax looked over the remaining Jedi. Besides Altis himself and Scout, there was only Ash Jarvee and two more standing.

"This is all?" he asked.

Altis nodded gravely. "I didn't train my people to be soldiers."

As he scrambled off the bridge, Den shouted, "We need to go! Now!"

The 501st troops from the other side were already cresting the bridge. The remaining Jedi raced for the cover of the streets, but the enemy gave chase. A shot took another of Altis' Jedi in the back of the head. Scout and Sacha stayed at the rear of the fleeing group, batting back blasts with their lightsabers, while Altis and Magash joined Jax at the front of the column.

Just as Jax led them into a narrow alley, something spiked alarm through the meld. In their minds Scout and Sacha screamed alarm,

but Jax didn't know why until he saw a tiny spot of black arc over his back, then drop right in front of him with a metallic clatter.

"Grenade!" he shouted, and tried to throw it forward with the Force.

He got it into the air right before it went off. The force of the explosion burst through the confined space of the alley, shattering windows and blowing open doors. Jax felt agony surge through the mind-meld and felt the back of his head snap back onto hard flagstones and knew, *knew* he should have died after that grenade blew up in his face.

He opened his eyes, felt weight on his chest. He heard the sound of blaster-fire behind him and tried to roll the weight off.

He pushed. It fell away. He blinked his vision clear and saw Magash lying next to him.

"Magash!" he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook. "Why did you *do* that? Magash?"

Her eyes opened slowly; her face was wrenched in pain.

"Magash," he pleaded, "Why?"

"I was... protecting my teacher," the Zabrak woman said. She tried to stand, and Jax knew she wouldn't give up, even though she should. He grabbed her by the shoulders and helped lift her on weak legs. Her entire back was scorched, blood was running out of one burst ear and an ugly shrapnel-wound on the shoulder.

He was so shocked by the explosion, by her injury, that he barely noticed the fight going on at the mouth of the alley. Lightsabers flashed and hummed through the smoke, bouncing back rifle-shots fired at short range. Through the haze he saw someone- Ash, maybe- cut down one trooper while others still piled into the alley to finish the Jedi off. More laser-blasts filled the alley and Jax fumbled for his weapon to deflect them. He saw another of Altis' people be cut down and felt the pain rush through the mind meld, then recede as Kina Ha soothed it-

-And then, suddenly, the agony was too strong. It overwhelmed everything. Jax staggered and nearly let go of Magash.

Just as fast, the agony was gone. So was the mind meld. For a moment Jax was overcome with a sense of cold, black loneliness. Then he realized that Kina Ha was dead.

Magash whispered something, a Dathomiri incantation or battle prayer. Then she pulled herself free of his arms and charged into the fray.

There was nothing else Jax could do but fire his saber and charge in after her. He saw Magash cut down one trooper right before he fired a shot at Scout, then spin around and thrust her blade right through another man's chest.

She lurched forward a little too far. Her balance shifted; pain stabbed through her body. She tried to readjust her footing and tug her blade out of the black armor.

A 501st soldier, all in black, was right beside Magash. He raised his rifle and fired once, point-blank, into the side of her head.

Jax was on the man a second later, cutting him down with ease. When he dropped next to Magash it was too late. The shot had killed her instantly.

The rest of the battle ended quickly, but Jax barely noticed. Once the last troopers dropped and the smoke started to clear he felt Den gently shake him by the shoulder.

"Jax," the Sullustan said softly, "We've got to go. *Now*."

Jax couldn't take his eyes off the body. The ruined side of her face had fallen onto the wet flagstones and the other was turned to face him. It almost looked like Magash was peacefully asleep.

"I got her into this..." he muttered, half to himself. "I wanted to train her. I thought I could be some Jedi Master..."

Sacha crouched next to the body on the other side. With one hand she reached out and gently brushed Magash's cheek, but her face was dark with anger.

"I hope there's a lot more in Imps in that hangar," she growled.

"This is *my* fault," Jax moaned.

"Magash did what she *always* did," Den said firmly. "And it was her choice to follow you."

"I didn't ask her to sacrifice herself for me."

"You didn't have to. Now come *on*, Jax, before more come."

It seemed awful to leave Magash here in this dark, cold alley, but Jax knew they had no choice. He stood up. So did Den and Sacha. He looked around and saw the debris, the bodies. He saw Altis, Scout, and Ash surveying the dead.

He saw I-Five standing at the far end, Thracia Cho Leem still clinging to his back.

"How do we get to the hangar from here?" he asked the old woman.

"I can guide you," she said.

"Kina Ha..." Scout breathed, "She's gone, isn't she?"

"There's still the group near the extraction facility. They should be there by now," Altis said. "We can't keep them waiting."

Scout nodded. So did Jax. Thracia began giving instructions to I-Five, and like a loyal beast of burden he plodded along as fast as his servos could carry him, deep through the dark streets of Theed.

Jax followed until that death-choked alley was far behind them. He felt like if he glanced over his shoulder he'd see it still.

* * *

Flight from the palace was flight into a black and icy hell.

Laser-blasts and fire seemed to flash everywhere. Explosions thundered. Gnarled wreckage and debris and clumps of pavement and snow geysered through the air around Palace Plaza.

Sola kept her head down as she ran, right behind Apailana. Ran Nebr and two of the other Jedi ran up ahead, sabers blazing, cutting their way through a small cluster of black-armored Imperial soldiers. The rest of the Jedi who'd come with them had already fallen; some had stayed in the Palace to try and protect Kina Ha as long as possible, but the rest had been killed during the initial charge onto the Plaza.

Without his comrades or whatever special powers Kina Ha had given him, Nebr had become anxious, even angry. Sola knew that was dangerous for a Jedi but right now she didn't care, because the Jedi in front of her were carving those elite Imperial commandos to pieces.

When they'd all fallen, Nebr shut off his lightsaber and called, "Come! Hurry!"

Sola turned and looked over her shoulder. She didn't know what had happened to Sio Bibble. The old counselor had made a valiant effort to keep up with them, but he was gone now; killed or captured or maybe even hiding someplace safe.

As for the rest of them, they kept running down the south edge of the plaza. The battle near the palace steps was finally dying down; the RSF officers were fighting to the last but there were barely any left now.

Their small group kept running toward the triumphal arch that marked the midpoint of the plaza. After that they might be able to slip down a sidestreet and escape for the hangar.

"Master Jedi!" Sola called.

Nebr turned, a little impatient, and waited for Sola and the queen to catch up.

As she got closer, Sola said, "Master Jedi, we should try to-"

There was a tiny yelping sound; she thought of her daughters slipping on ice. Then she looked behind her and saw Apailana, face-down on the snow-wet flagstones.

"Your Majesty!" she shouted and scrambled for her queen.

She slipped, slid, landed knees-first on the hard stone. An explosion flared by the palace, lighting up the night. She could see the black stain of a well-placed sniper blast between Apailana's shoulder-blades.

She shouted her queen's name again, pulled the body onto her lap, tried to roll her over. There was another flash: she saw her sister's face, painted white and framed by gold, looking young and peaceful and asleep.

She heard the signature noise of lightsabers igniting and looked up. A black shadow had fallen out of the night. Its red sword danced between Nebr and the other two Jedi.

Still cradling the dead queen in her arms, Sola stared in shock and horror as the black shadow cut one Jedi in two, then speared its crimson blade through another's back. Nebr fought the hardest, catching blows and returning his own. Once he even struck a

glancing blow off the shadow's armored shoulder-piece, but the shadow riposted with a flash of sizzling blue lightning from an outstretched hand.

Nebr staggered, dropped his weapon. The shadow took his head off with one clean slice.

Sola stared as the shadow loomed closer. She couldn't take her eyes off it, even to look down at her dead queen.

The shadow bent low. The glow of its red sword lit her face, and the horrible mask she'd never imagined she'd see in person.

The mask just stared at her; she saw her own red face distorted in the bulge of its black eyes. Low steady breathing rasped through its mouthpiece, but it didn't speak.

Somehow Sola found words, and the courage to speak them. "I am Counselor Sola Naberrié," she said, "Advisor to the late Queen Apailana."

The mask stared, breathed. To her shock, that awful red sword stayed unmoving between them.

Sola took a deep breath and said, "The queen is dead. Long live the queen."

She waited for a flash of red, and the fall of death, but neither came. The last explosions and blaster-fire of a finished fight faded slowly behind her but she didn't hear them. She didn't hear anything over the constant mechanic rasp of that awful mask.

Then, finally, Darth Vader said, "I know who you are."

Sola stared, uncomprehending. Suddenly she felt a tightness on her throat, like it was being squeezed by an invisible hand.

"I have only one question for you," he said. "Where is Jax Pavan?"

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"Even after losing Magash, I think all of us were thinking that our escape from Theed was too easy. We knew the Imps had tracked the Jedi here and we knew they'd sent their elite 501st. That meant Vader was there too, and there was no way he was going to let Jax slip through his fingers yet again. And if Vader wanted Jax, well there was one place he was sure to find him. We all knew that, but we had to keep fighting toward the hangar anyway. It was the only place we could go."

Thracia Cho Leem led them true. When they reached the base of the massive three-domed plasma extraction facility connected to the main hangar, she directed them toward a hidden hatch leading into the facility's main-tenance system. The snow around the hatch had already been cleared away, seemingly recently, which Jax took as a good sign at first.

As they began working their way through the narrow machinery-choked corridors, seeing only by the glow of ignited lightsabers, he began to worry. He reached out with the Force but couldn't sense any of the Jedi who had presumably come through shortly before them.

I-Five and Thracia were leading the way, so Jax slunk back to talk to Altis. He asked, "Can you feel your people? Anything at all?"

The old man frowned. "Lukan and his people were here, I'm sure of it. I can feel... traces of them. Very recent."

"Maybe they went on to the hangar," Jax said hopefully.

"I told them to wait until we'd all meet in the extraction facility." Altis grimaced. "I don't like this at all."

"I don't feel Vader up ahead."

"Well, that's *some* comfort-"

Up ahead, there was the clanging of a heavy metal door being manually opened. Jax looked to see Thracia, now on her feet, standing behind I-Five, who was using his strong metal body to pull back the latching mechanism and push open the heavy hatch that would lead them out of these tight corridors.

When the hatch opened, white light spilled into the hall. Jax squinted and shut off his lightsaber, as did the others. He had no idea what could be so bright until he stepped out of the narrow hallway and into the vast interior of the extraction facility.

The room looked big enough to swallow the Royal Palace twice over. Layers of long metal catwalks criss-crossed an immense void that seemed to plunge all the way to the planet's core. Huge extraction devices pulled pillars of luminous white plasma out of the abyss. Some catwalks cut across the space without touching the pillars, while others abutted the shafts of light and formed rings around the sizzling, pulsing energy.

As the rest of the group stepped out of the maintenance corridor, I-Five tapped Jax on the shoulder and pointed to set of heavy blast doors on the far opposite wall.

"You sure that's the way to the hangar?" Jax asked.

"Quite sure," Thracia said as she straightened her tunic.

Jax gave the catwalks a quick survey. One cantilevered out dead ahead of them and went all the way to a ring around a plasma pillar before stopping. To get to the hangar entrance, they'd need to hop up to another catwalk running in a perpendicular direction, then jump up one more to *another* running directly to the blast doors. He looked around and couldn't find any obvious lifts or even ladders that would take them two levels up.

"A little impractical, don't you think?" Jax sighed.

"A ladder *would* be nice," said Den.

"No railings on the catwalks either," I-Five added. "Does this planet even *have* occupational safety laws?"

"Well," Den shrugged, "At least it looks pretty."

Jax glanced at the other behind them. Sacha's face was tight with anger; Scout and Ash looked heavy with grief and the two old masters looked more curious than any-thing.

"Lukan should be here," Altis muttered. "Where *are* they?"

A voice, far louder, responded, "I'm afraid you arrived a little too late."

Dread filled the Force. Jax's lightsaber ignited in his hand. He looked up one level above theirs and saw a trio of dark figures stepping into view from the other side of a bright plasma pillar.

Their features were hard to see against the glare, but he recognized the Inquisitor's robes two were wearing. One robed being looked Falleen; the one in the center looked human but seemed to have a strip of black cloth wrapped over his eyes and around his bald head. The third seemed to be a woman with a scar across her face, but her legs were cut off below the knee and replaced with long, double-jointed metal claws.

Altis stepped to the edge of the platform. His lightsaber was ignited in his hand and his face was set with grim determination Jax had never seen from before.

"Jerec!" Altis called. "What have you done?"

Something appeared from the folds of the bald man's robes: one human head, dangling from long hair held tightly by a black-gloved hand. From that distance, Jax was mercifully unable to make out the face.

Jax could feel the anger seething off of Altis, but the old master kept his voice steady as he said, "Do you kill all of them?"

"Your students have always relied on you too much, Djinn." Jerec's fist opened. The head plunged into the void. He spread his arms and said, "I'd like you to meet *my* apprentices, Kuthara and Drayneen.

"We already know *her*," Ash said as she stepped up beside her master.

"Yes, I was going to join her on Prakith to handle your interrogation, but unfortunately, the Emperor saw fit to leave that in Lord Vader's less capable hands."

A shot rang out. A laser blast lanced out from over Jax's shoulder and slapped into Jerec's outstretched palm. It flashed and fizzled into nothing against the blackness of his glove.

Jax looked behind him to see I-Five, still holding the Verpine rifle with his eye on the targeting scope.

"We don't have time for chit-chat," the droid said.

"I agree wholeheartedly," Jerec said.

With a flutter of black cloth, he dropped off one catwalk and landed softly on the one below, leaving his heavy robe behind. A red lightsaber sprung to life in his hand. Above him, Kuthara and Drayneen ignited their weapons as well.

Altis took a deep breath and said, "We'll hold off Jerec. Get your people to the hangar."

Jax looked at the catwalk above. "We'll still have to carve our way through."

"Then I suggest you get started."

"Master, you-"

"I'm angry, Jax, but don't worry. The dark stopped tempting me long ago."

"It's not that. I don't want people to sacrifice themselves for me."

"That's hardly my plan."

From the end of the catwalk ahead, silhouetted by the bright white plasma pillar, Jerec called, "As your man said, we don't have time for talk."

"Okay then," Altis said, and charged down the catwalk, Ash right behind him. A second later, Scout came racing after them. As she whipped past Jax felt her touch in the Force, saying simply *Go!*

Up above, Kuthara and Drayneen were waiting. Sacha appeared beside him with a lightsaber in her hand. He knew he couldn't talk her out of it. He took her hand and together they sprung up through the air, onto the platform that circled the burning energy shaft.

Then the fight began.

* * *

Everything exploded into light and motion and it was hard for me to keep track of it all. Jax and Sacha began fighting on the upper catwalk. They stayed close together, sometimes even fighting back-to-back against their two opponents. Jax was fighting defensively against that metal-legged with Drayneen while Sacha was lashing out at the Falleen. Even I could tell her move-ments were angry, sloppy, but they were fierce enough and fast enough to keep Kuthara from striking back.

On the ringed platform below, the four of them were in some kind of dance around the plasma pillar. Scout was small and weak and Altis was old and slow but they both joined nimble Ash in attacking Jerec. To my own amaze-ment, the blind man was holding them off. They came at him from both sides but he anticipated every attack before it came and blocked them again and again. It was like he was seeing everything around him in the Force; it didn't matter if he was facing Ash with Scout behind him or vice versa. Sometimes blue lightning flashed out of his hands and stunned his enemies; one blast knocked Scout back to the plasma pillar and she barely escaped with only singed, smoking clothes.

And as for me, I-Five, and the old woman, they left us behind to watch.

I-Five still had that rifle and was trying to put those imported combat subroutines to good use, but they were all moving so fast even his electronic reflexes had trouble tracking them.

"We need to get higher," Five grimaced. At our low angle we couldn't do much for Jax and Sacha.

"A ladder would be real nice right now," I agreed.

Thracia let out a breath and touched us both on the waist. "You're going to have to trust me, gentlemen."

"What does *that* mean?" I asked.

"You might want to close your eyes."

When someone tells you that, you never close your eyes. No, you keep them wide open because you don't know what's going to happen, and you end up watching as the platform falls away beneath your feet and you shoot straight up through the air until that safe deck is a five, ten, fifteen meter drop below you.

You only close your eyes in relief when the little old Jedi woman lets your feet down on the long black catwalk leading all the way over the chasm to the big blast doors that lead to the hangar.

"Well," I-Five said, "That was efficient."

"Can you open those doors?" I asked Thracia. "Can you talk to them?"

The woman nodded wearily. Our little flight had taken the wind out of her.

"You two go ahead," Five hefted that rifle again. "I'll cover them."

"Five, we-"

"Den, go! Please!"

I knew he wasn't leaving without Jax; whatever else Five was now, that essential piece hadn't changed.

Thracia tugged on my sleeve and said, "Come, Den. We have our own way to help."

She was right, but it didn't make me feel any better as I followed her across the long catwalk and left I-Five behind.

* * *

Scout had no idea an old blind guy could be so sly.

The worst part was, she could *feel* his awareness radiating out of his physical body. Jerec didn't have eyes to see, he had something so much better. He felt their emotions and intentions as well as the movements of their physical bodies. Trying to fight him, even three-on-one, was like fighting a mirror-glass prism that matched every strike with its own.

Three-one-one was a messy way to fight, too. Ash was the fastest and got the most hits in. Scout and Altis were there to draw Jerec's attention, keep him on his toes, distract his defenses while

Ash kept on trying to land a killing blow. But for all their efforts the man was just too *good*, too fast, too perfect at knowing where every attack would be. The only consolation was that they had him constantly on defense, with no room to strike.

Scout had never faced an enemy who so simply and completely outmatched her. What made it worse was that Altis and Ash were outmatched too.

Her master was getting tired; she could see the gleam of his sweat and hear his rasping breath as they continued their endless dance around the plasma pillar. As they chased Jerec around to the far end of the catwalk, where there was only one railing-less ring around the pillar and no place else to go, Altis attempted an offensive push. Jerec batted his attack away and then Ash's, but his back was suddenly to the ring's edge.

Scout moved low and swiped at his feet. He jumped back, right to the edge of the platform. Ash lunged forward with a straight thrust at his abdomen. Scout saw Jerec spin to avoid it, lose footing, lose balance, and tumble backwards into the void.

For a second Scout was filled with elation. Then Jerec shot upward over the edge and dropped down right behind Ash. The woman spun to face him but was too late. Jerec's red blade swiped horizontally through her.

For one long, awful second, Ash seemed frozen and whole in front of him. Then both halves of her tipped over and fell into the void.

Scout screamed. Altis radiated a deep, weary sadness.

Taking a step back from them, Jerec wiped sweat from his forehead and said, "*That* one was well-trained Djinn. Was she your best?"

Altis held his lightsaber in front of him but didn't move. Scout didn't understand what he was waiting for; she wanted to lunge at Jerec right now.

"Now, *this* one is angry," Jerec tipped his blade toward Scout. "Clouded judgment. She feels too deeply, Djinn."

"I don't train my Jedi to be as empty as you," Altis said.

Jerec shook his head. "Yoda was right about one thing. Attachment was always your weakness."

Scout had enough. Letting her anger take over, she charged, and her master was right behind her.

Drayneen moved like an acrobat; with one agile bound she was within a half-meter of Jax, and with another jump she propelled herself into a high somersault over his head. He tracked her, blade up, as she came down a full meter behind him.

One long leg swept out like a scythe; Jax raised his lightsaber and caught it. For a second she froze there, perched on one leg while the other's *beskar* blade sizzled against Jax's lightsaber.

Then the blade fell back and she jumped another meter away. Jax risked a glance behind him at Sacha, who was still fighting Kuthara on the ring around the energy pillar. Sacha was angry and reckless but she was at least fast enough to keep the Falleen from landing good attacks.

Jax turned back to Drayneen just as she lunged toward him again, this time with her lightsaber. Those artificial legs gave her superhuman speed and agility, and he was barely able to block her attack in time. As his lightsaber sparked against hers he tried to shift the blade downward to stab her in the abdomen, but she leaned harder into him. He tried to skirt his feet back, lest she swipe out with one of her leg blades again.

He heard the tang of a blaster rifle firing and heard Drayneen cry out as a shot winged her shoulders. He immediately gave her a Force-shove that sent her skidding down the catwalk and over the edge, but one hand managed to cling to the rim.

Jax glanced up, saw I-Five lying flat on the catwalk above with his rifle-barrel peeking over the edge.

He gave the droid a tiny nod of thanks, then ran to help Sacha.

Jax got there just in time. The woman took a too-hard swing at Kuthara but the Falleen ducked it entirely. Her swing carried her forward and knocked her off-balance and Kuthara landed a jab in her abdomen.

Sacha grunted and grasped her wound. Jax leaped in and began attacking Kuthara, pushing him away. He pushed the Falleen until

his back was to the white-hot plasma and tried to pin him there, praying I-Five had a good angle of fire.

Just when it seemed like Kuthara was going to slip away, one laser blast took him in the shoulder. The Falleen grunted; another shot landed straight in his smooth green forehead.

Jax shut off his lightsaber just as Kuthara's clattered to the ground. The dead body swayed on its feet, then fell into the plasma shaft. There was a flash of light, the reek of burnt flesh, and nothing else.

Behind him Sacha grunted, "I was trying to do that."

"How bad is it?" he asked her. "Your side-"

"I'm okay," she grimaced. She still had her lightsaber and was almost standing straight, even as her other hand held her side. "Where's the other one?"

Drayneen was on them before Jax could speak. She jumped over Sacha's head and landed low, spinning her lightsaber in a full red arc that forced Jax and Sacha to jump away from each other. She spun on Sacha and began a fierce flurry of attacks. The wounded woman struggled to block them all. Jax knew she was trying to force the fight to the other side of the plasma pillar, which would block them from I-Five's attack.

Determined to stop her, Jax went after her from behind. Drayneen spun on one leg to block his lightsaber with hers-

-while the other blade shot up in a backward kick and speared Sacha through the chest.

Jax was stunned. Drayneen gave him a Force-shove that nearly pushed him off the edge of the ring. With one leg-blade still lodged in Sacha's body, her sword-arm flicked back. A fan of red-white severed the woman's head from her neck.

Sacha's body fell into the void but Drayneen held her head by the hair; death had preserved a look of shock.

Jax jumped to his feet and charged. Drayneen tossed the head casually into the abyss as well and started blocking his attacks. He kept on pounding her blade, again and again, forcing her around the ring.

When he got close enough, he gave a hard vertical swing from over the head- forcing her to block high. That gave him the opening to land a kick in her gut. The woman huffed, staggered back. Jax, weapon still high, angled his wrists for a horizontal strike and swung. He cut in above Drayneen's head, below her wrists. Her saber and upper arms all went sailing into the void.

For a moment her face was frozen in a look of shock exactly like Sacha's.

Then a laser-blast nailed her square in the back. Her body trembled. Jax shifted his grip one more time and swung straight down, cleaving her body in two from head to groin.

One half fell to the catwalk; the other fell farther.

Jax looked up to see I-Five, face heavy with sorrow. He felt one cold wet trail run down his own cheek.

Then he heard the clash of lightsabers below, and knew the fight wasn't over yet.

* * *

Scout caught a fistful of blue lightning on her lightsaber even as Jerec blocked Altis' swing with his own. The Inquisitor skipped back two steps, putting himself closer to the edge of the platform but not close enough.

Still, there was enough space for Altis and Scout to step apart. Jerec held his arms open, as if challenging them to come at him at once. One wrong step and all three of them would go plunging into the planet's core. He knew that, and so did Scout and Altis.

But for Scout, still burning with rage after Ash's death, it was too good an opening to pass up.

She charged. Jerec shifted his free hand and fired another volley of lightning at her but she was already falling back. She skidded boots-first across the smooth metal catwalk, aiming between Jerec and Altis. As she passed she swept her lightsaber at Jerec's boot. The Inquisitor barely managed to jump out of its way.

Scout went right off the platform's edge, but she was ready for it. Her free hand reached out and grabbed the rim. She called the

Force and it came easily; she pulled herself one-handed back onto the ring.

Jerec was already on Altis. He was attacking the old master hard and fast, backing him toward the pillar of scorching plasma. Scout ran right at him, saber raised high and ready to strike him while his back was turned.

For a second she forgot, and a second was too much.

Without turning his head, he shifted his stance to block Scout's attack with his lightsaber. He was already close enough to Altis to breathe on his face; before the Jedi Master could land a blow he grabbed Altis by the chest and sent a surge of crackling energy through his body.

Scout's momentum carried her forward even as Jerec parried her attack. Her blaze sizzled off of his. She fell forward and he cracked a sharp elbow in her face. Pain exploded in her head and she fell back, dropping her lightsaber.

She hit the floor hard but opened her eyes just in time to see Jerec spear Altis through the chest.

Altis' face went slack; his body swayed on his feet. Just when Scout thought he was going to fall back and dissolve in the plasma, Jerec stepped aside and let him fall face-down onto cold black metal.

Jerec turned his attention to her. He stepped over to her lightsaber, casually kicked it over the edge of the platform, then walked right up to her. She was pulled upward by the Force, right into his fist, which clenched hard around her throat. She grabbed it with both hands and struggled to kick him in the chest, but his arm held her just outside the reach of her flailing legs.

"You're angry, child, aren't you?" he said, almost sympathetically.

"You killed them both," she hissed. "You-"

"I just lost Kuthara and Drayneen. I'm going to need new apprentices. Would you be interested, child?"

"I'll never join you."

"No," he sighed a little. "I didn't think so. Well, you're not very strong in the Force anyway. It's a wonder Altis saw fit to train you at all."

Through her rage, Scout could see Jax Pavan, lightsaber bobbing in front of him, racing down the catwalk.

"I can sense your thoughts," Jerec reminded her. "And his."

Jerec could crush her throat in an instant. Jax would never get there in time.

"You should never have gotten involved," he said as he tightened his grip. "You're not strong enough for a fight like this."

Scout gasped for breath, tried to speak.

Amused, Jerec brought her a little closer. "What was that, child? Defiant last words?"

She choked, "I... fight... *dirty*."

Scout grabbed his wrist with both hands, swung her body forward, and slammed the tip of her boot right between his legs.

He gasped and dropped her. She fell between his legs; he lifted one foot to stomp her but she rolled beneath it. She came up behind him and grabbed his leg with both hands, one right below the kneecap, one above.

She called on the Force and *pulled*.

She could hear his kneecap shatter as his leg snapped backwards. He screamed and stumbled forward, trying to keep balance with only one good leg. His lightsaber clattered to the ground and for a moment Scout wanted to reach out, grab it, and angrily slash the man in two, then keep slashing until she'd burned away all he was and avenged Ash and Master Altis with a storm of furious red.

But, just as fast, she realized neither of them would want that, so she just called on the Force one more time and gave Jerec a tiny shove.

He fell. She crawled over to the edge of the platform just in time to see him hit the catwalk three levels down, hard. Not as satisfying as seeing him fall forever, but it would do.

Jax appeared beside her. He grabbed her by both shoulders and helped her up. "Scout, are you okay? Scout?"

She blinked, saw the concern and sadness in his eyes.

"Sacha?" she asked.

Jax shook his head.

Sacha, Magash, Ash, Altis, it was too much. Scout staggered over to where her master lay face-up on the hard metal. His chest was rising up and down, very slowly.

"Oh, Master," she groaned and bent low. His eyes were closed but his lips were pursed. He almost looked asleep.

Those lips barely moved. "Call me... Djinn..."

Scout laughed. Tears blurred her vision. She ran a hand across the side of his face.

"I'm so sorry," she told him, "I should have-"

"Scout..." he breathed, "Have to... go..."

"He's right," Jax took her by the shoulders.

"But I should have-" Her voice halted, choked with sobs.

Somehow, Altis' hand came up to caress her cheek. "Oh Scout... my.... Last student..."

Jax's hands tightened on her shoulders but she couldn't pull away. She said, "Thank you, Djinn. Thank you for everything."

"Live, Scout... Just..." His hand fell away. His chest stopped moving.

Softly, Jax whispered, "I'm sorry."

Scout stood on wobbly legs and said, "Lots to be sorry about today."

"Do you have your lightsaber?" he asked.

She shook her head and looked down at Jerec's. She bent low, grabbed it, clipped it to her belt.

"Better than nothing," she said.

Jax nodded and put his arm around her waist. She understood his intention. Together they bent legs and sprung up to the platform above. Their boots hit the deck hard but didn't stay; one more Force-assisted leap took them to the long catwalk that ran straight toward the entrance to the hangar.

As Scout and Jax ran toward the heavy blast doors, she asked, "Where are the others? Thracia, Five, Den?"

"I told them to go ahead into the hangar. If we're in luck they've got *Laranth* prepped and ready."

Scout didn't believe in luck, especially after today, but she kept running with Jax until they reached the blast doors. Jax pounded the control panel until the heavy durasteel shields began to roll open.

Scout saw Den first, then Thracia to his left and I-Five to his right. All three of them were on their knees. Behind them stood two dozen 501st troops in jet-black armor.

And standing in the center of it all, with his lightsaber hanging between Thracia and Den's necks, was Darth Vader.

"Welcome, Jax Pavan," the dark lord said.

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"When Vader had us there in the hangar, I wasn't scared, at least not for myself. I knew Jax would come, and I was afraid for him. I was afraid for I-Five too, who was on the verge of becoming much more than he'd ever been. But myself? You'd think I'd be terrified, with that red lightsaber humming in my ear, but I wasn't. I guess, somehow, I'd accepted that what happened next wasn't my story. I was never the central player. I was just there to witness everything, right until the end. And that's what I did."

Jax stood in the center of the threshold. His green light-saber hummed in his hand but he let it hang at his side. Behind him, Scout had turned on her new red weapon but looked unsure of what to do.

Standing behind Den, I-Five, and Thracia, Darth Vader said, "Is that all you've brought with you, Pavan? Of all the Jedi on Naboo, are these the only ones to survive?"

Jax sensed the anger rising in Scout and tried to calm her, despite having plenty of his own.

Vader tilted his head curiously. "Tell me, what happened to the Inquisitors in the extraction chamber? I see that child has stolen a red lightsaber."

"I got this from Inquisitor Jerec." Scout hefted it in front of her.

Vader paused. Jax almost thought he felt a touch of amusement from him.

"What do you want now?" Jax called. "Do you want me to join you? To be your apprentice or something? Are you asking me to trade my life for theirs?"

Vader stared at him, almost as though he hadn't decided himself. Then, finally, he shook his head. "I do not ask for anything, Jax Pavan. I do not barter or negotiate. The old woman will be brought back to the Emperor. This... droid will be taken apart for further study. I sense the Force inside him, and my Master will be quite interested in that."

"What about Den?" Jax asked.

Vader considered a moment. "Perhaps I should kill him. Perhaps his death would fuel the rage deep within you."

The lightsaber tipped a little closer to the Sullustan's head. To Jax's surprise, he didn't flinch.

"There's no point in that," Jax said. He tried to sound braver than he felt. "We've been over this. I'm not going to turn. I'm not going to vindicate what you did."

He shut his lightsaber off and said, "If you want to kill me, go ahead. As long as I don't turn, I still win."

I-Five's droid face was shocked and pleading. Den's mouth dropped open in shock.

Jax stood there, waiting, wondering if Vader was actually going to do it, wondering if he'd come this far, fought so hard, for all of it to end here on Naboo.

Vader stepped around from behind Den and I-Five. He lifted his lightsaber in front of him and stepped toward the doorway, and in that moment Jax realized that, somehow, the dark lord's priorities had shifted.

He was no longer interested in turning Jax. He wanted to kill him, to end this hunt, to sever Darth Vader from Anakin Skywalker forever, here on Naboo, this planet he'd loved and almost called home.

Then the far wall of the hangar exploded.

Black smoke and fiery debris poured through the hole in the heavy marble and sandstone fall. Cold wind rushed into the hangar. Vader, his soldiers, even the prisoners all turned to look, even as the smoke rushed them and stole their breath and choked their vision with ash.

Then Jax heard the sound of two lightsabers igniting at the same time.

Blaster-rifles popped off shots. People ran for cover. Jax found Scout's hand and threw them both against the threshold's slick marble frame.

An invisible hand reached into the hangar and fanned away the smoke. Suddenly Jax saw it all: the black troopers aiming their rifles, his friends hiding behind storage crates, Darth Vader with his back turned to face A'Sharad Hett, standing in the middle of the swirling ash with twin sabers blazing.

* * *

Everything seemed to freeze for one second in that dark tableau. Then everything happened at once.

The troopers started shooting at Hett. Vader lunged for fierce-faced the Jedi. I-Five picked up Thracia like a man carrying a bride and ran for *Laranth*, sitting tucked away in the far corner of the hangar. As for me, I ran right with them, as fast as my stubby legs would go.

The interceptor barely fit within a docking berth meant for much smaller starfighters, even with both wings pulled up and angled for the ceiling. To my shock and joy, nobody had damaged it or even changed the locks. I-Five put Thracia down, punched in the code, and the landing ramp fell down from the ship's belly.

As Thracia started hobbling up the ramp I grabbed I-Five's arm and said, "Get her started! Hurry!"

"Really? I was going to make a caf first," Five said. "What about Jax?"

We both looked to the center of the hangar. Hett was batting back the troopers' fire with ease. Vader walked purposefully to meet him. And Jax was running to join the fight.

"What's he *doing*?" Five gaped. "We have to *run*!"

"What about Scout?" I looked around. "Where is she?"

She wasn't about to chase Vader and I didn't see her stolen red lightsaber either, but I did spot her skulking around the opposite wall of the hangar.

I also saw three troopers spot her and open fire. Her lightsaber sprung to life but they started closing on her and all she could do was bat their attacks as they backed her into a berth next to a small personal shuttlecraft.

"Five, I'm going to do something stupidly heroic," I said. "Fire the engines and close the ramp until I get back."

"Aye aye, sir," I-Five said, and ran up the ramp.

I didn't pause, didn't take one last look at my friend. I'd curse myself for that years afterward, but at that moment all I cared about was being, as I'd said, stupidly heroic.

They'd taken Five's Verpine rifle when they'd captured us but I spotted an Imp rifle that had skidded across the floor and rested directly between me and Scout. The troopers' attention was still split between Scout and the Jedi lightshow, so I sprinted across the hangar. I ducked low, scooped up the rifle, and kept running. Some troops must have spotted me because red lasers started whipping over my head.

When I got close enough I dropped to the ground and skidded across the stone floor. I squeezed the trigger again and again and sprayed rifle-shots that took down all three troopers distracted by Scout.

Of course, when I scrambled to my feet and scampered next to her, there were more after us. I didn't have time to ask if she was okay and she didn't have time to thank me, which was fine, because I was already pretty damn impressed with myself.

We took cover behind the shuttle in the docking berth, which looked like a shiny silver fin standing vertically. That hull was pretty but durable, and it reflected enemy gunfire. We ducked under it and

I found the control panel that pulled down the landing ramp. We scrambled inside and closed it right behind us.

The ship barely had room inside for a cockpit and a cargo hold. We ran to the cockpit. I fell in the pilot's seat. Scout dropped in beside me and we scoured the control panels until we found the main power and switched it on. The troopers kept shooting and their small-arms fire kept screeching over our hull. I figured we'd be okay for a few minutes, at least.

"Does this thing have weapons?" I asked as I scoured the panel. "Tell me it has weapons!"

"Shields!" Scout said as she stabbed a button.

An energy field shimmered over the cockpit. The rifle-fire flashed and dissipated without harming the ship. I look across the hangar and saw *Laranth*, too, had her shields up.

Then I saw a bunch more 501st troopers pouring into the hangar, at least two dozen more.

And on the opposite end, three fighting Jedi danced closer to the gaping hole in the hangar wall.

* * *

Darth Vader battled for his life.

It was different than the fight over Prakith. Then, Hett had been shocked and confused, as had Vader himself. Once more he'd intended to kill Jax Pavan and sever his link with Anakin Skywalker, and once more his will had faltered. The sudden reappearance of A'Sharad Hett had thrown him into greater confusion and he hadn't been sure what he wanted: to kill these old ghosts, or join with them. That was why he'd lost.

Only Jax Pavan was the same now. Hett blazed with anger and loss and awful determination. He understood so much more than he had just a few day ago. Vader understood too. The past was not something that could be escaped. Anakin Skywalker would never be put to rest in a stone tomb, immortalized like Padmé. He was the hot fire that burned Darth Vader at every moment.

Because that fire could not be escapes, the only option was to embrace that agony and grow stronger.

In killing Jax Pavan he would know pain, and that pain would make him greater. At long last he understood, and he was finally, truly, ready to do it.

As for A'Sharad Hett, Darth Vader still hoped to use that man in a different way.

As they ran, spun, jumped, twirled, clashed and attacked and parried across the hangar floor, he was dimly aware that Pavan's allies had taken shelter inside ships. He also knew that more 501st squads had arrived.

None of that mattered. All of them were simply standing aside now, breathlessly watching the battle.

Even a Sith of Vader's skill was at a disadvantage with three blades against his one. Hett especially kept attacking with hot rage, raining down blow after blow with both weapons. Vader kept picking up chunks of debris off the hangar floor and throwing them at his opponents. It was enough to keep them on their guard and decrease their attacks, but at the same time he knew that if he got close enough to strike one he'd leave himself open to the other.

The only thing to do was separate them, which is why he kept backing toward the massive hole Hett had blown in the hangar wall. Winter breeze blew through the gap; while he couldn't feel either cold or wind, the gust carried a few fat snowflakes between duelists. Vader kept picking up debris to clear the path behind him; Hett and Pavan had no qualms keeping up the fight.

They seemed to think they were the ones cornering him and not the other way around.

He wanted, *needed* to kill Pavan. Once that was done, he could try something else with Hett. Together, two children from Tatooine could take down the Emperor and rule the galaxy together, or at least until one turned on the other. They were so different but so alike in their love and their pain. Hett was already fast falling to the Dark Side. It was his destiny to become a Sith, Vader knew it.

When he got close enough to the hangar wall, Darth Vader jumped over the rubble and out into the night.

Black boots landed in the snow and deftly stepped to the side. As he expected, A'Sharad Hett came leaping through the gap first. Vader immediately fell at him from the side. Hett raised both sabers to block his attacks. Vader knocked him back, step after snow-slick step, toward the railing that separated the pavement from a short drop into the Solleu River.

He knew Pavan was coming at him from behind. Vader gave Hett a strong Force-shove that knocked him back against the railing, then spun to block Pavan's attacks. He caught one blow, then another, and then he batted Pavan's saber aside with one hard swing and threw a face-full of force lightning into his chest.

Pavan screamed and fell back into the snow. His light-saber rolled out of his hand.

It was the perfect opportunity to end it, but Hett was already coming at him again. Vader spun and hurled him-self at Hett. He knocked the man back toward the railing, pinned him there, leaned close and spoke over the crackle of their clashing lightsabers.

"Your fate is not to kill me, A'Sharad," he said. "You're meant for something *greater*."

Hett tried to rear back far enough to kick Vader in the gut; instead the Sith lord grabbed him by one leg and flipped him over his head and into the river.

Instead of the splash of cold water, Vader heard a soft *thud* and the sizzle of lightsabers stabbing ice.

He looked over the railing and saw Hett getting to his feet, sabers still blazing in both hands as he tried to find balance on the ice sheet covering the surface of the river. He was just as the edge of the ice; not ten meters down-stream the floes broke apart and were carried away by water tumbling fast down the cliff to the snowy floodplain far below.

Vader looked behind him and saw Pavan still inert on the ground. Then he leaped over the railing and onto the ice-choked river.

He could kill Jax Pavan once his back was clear.

When I finally figured out how to send a short-range signal on the comm, I called over to *Laranth* and said, "I-Five, are you there? I-Five?"

"Affirmative." The droid's voice was music to my ears. "Are your shields holding out?"

"More or less," I said.

The troops now milling around the hangar had mostly given up trying to pierce our shields with small arms, which would have been good except for that fact that, just as the fighting Jedi tumbled out through the smoking hole in the wall, even more troopers arrived and started setting up one of those tripod-mounted repeating blasters.

"Do you know where Jax went?" Five asked. "I couldn't see anything."

"Right out the hole with Hett and Vader."

"We need to get him. Can you fire your engines?"

"Sublight *and* hyperdrive," I told him.

"Good. I was worried we'd have to latch airlocks and run an Imp blockade at the same time."

"Where do we go when we get out of here?"

"Who the hell knows? We need to pick up Jax first."

"How do we do that?"

"How do you *think*, Den? We swoop in and grab him before Vader cuts him to bitty pieces. And before the Imps tear our shields open."

I looked beside me to Scout, who'd been anxiously watching the troopers set up their tripod gun. She noticed my attention and asked, "Five, is Thracia there?"

"Here and more or less intact, Scout," the old woman said. "I'm so sorry about Djinn."

"I know," Scout breathed. "But right now we've got to get out of here."

"Then let's stop yapping and punch it already," Five said. "Den, you good to fire those engines?"

I looked at my copilot. "What do you think? We ready?"

"As we'll ever be. I just wish we had guns."

"Beggars, choosers, you know how it goes," I said.

As I gripped the throttle I really, really wished Sacha were there, but there wasn't time for grief. I kicked in the repulsors and fired the engines. *Laranth* did the same. The troopers started splattering small arms fire on our shields again.

I-Five asked, "You want to go first or should I?"

"I'll give you the honors," I said, and watched as *Laranth* pulled out of her berth, spread those pretty wings, and leaped toward the hangar mouth.

* * *

Jax Pavan felt like his chest was going to crumple and collapse his heart, but somehow he found the strength to breath, open his eyes, and sit upright in the snow.

His first thought was, incredibly, how *peaceful* it seemed. He saw no troopers, no fighting Jedi. Yes, there was debris from the blown-open hole in the wall, and dark footprints in the snow, but even those were being whited-over again by the snowflakes bobbing downward on the wind to add to Theed's soft white blanket.

Then he heard the sound of lightsabers clashing on the river blow. He ran over to the railing to see Vader and Hett standing on the edge of the ice floes that clogged the river. Not far beyond, the ice broke apart and the freezing river-water tumbled by a great waterfall.

Before he could jump down, or shout, or do anything, he heard the sound of people pushing through the rubble behind him. He turned, reached for his lightsaber-

-and realized it was gone.

The first troopers climbing out of the hangar opened fire. He ran for cover behind the riverside boathouse. Laser- blasts scored its sandstone pillars. Over the railing, Hett and Vader kept fighting with matched fury. Everything they were was bleeding into the Force: anger, loss, hatred for each other and themselves. Jax had

known all those things after Laranth died, but unlike them, he'd had people to help pull him back from the dark.

He tried to reach out with the Force and find his lightsaber. If he couldn't, there was no way he could defend himself. He sensed it lying in the snow and called it; it snaked through the air between scampering soldiers until it slapped into his open palm.

Before he could turn it on, he heard the roar of one set of thrust engines blazing to life, then another. He knew the second set belonged to *Laranth*.

He looked toward the cliff's edge in time to see the dual flare of its thrust engines rocket out of the hangar. A small silver fin-shaped shuttle was close behind it. Some of the troops that had been shooting at him turned their attention to the ships, but *Laranth* wheeled around and dove lower over the river.

Laser blasts splattered on its shields, but it dropped them anyway and lowered its landing ramp. Jax saw Thracia Cho Leem crouched there with one arm stretched, palm outward, as though the tiny old woman could force back every rifle-shot that came their way.

In his mind, her voice said *Come!*

There was no hesitation. Vader and Hett were down, his friends were up. He knew where he wanted to be.

He ran for the railing, hopped atop it, and jumped further. The Force carried him upward until he slammed hard into the landing ramp.

Laranth immediately spun around and began soaring low toward the waterfall. Vader froze; so did Hett.

Both of them stared at him as he passed.

He extended a hand and screamed to Hett, "Come on! *Now!*"

They soared past slow enough for him to see Hett shake his head with a look of sadness and bitter resolve.

Then the landing ramp pulled up, sealing Jax and Thracia inside *Laranth* as they joined the other shuttle and raced toward snow-fat clouds and the stars beyond.

A'Sharad Hett watched *Laranth* soar past. The red flare of its engines reflected in the black mask of Vader's face as the dark lord stopped to watch it disappear.

Though none of it showed, Hett could feel Vader explode with rage.

He threw himself forward. Vader barely had time to whip up his blade to block the attacks. He knocked Vader back two steps. He heard ice crack beneath them but kept attacking. He knocked Vader back again and again and with every step he felt his enemy anger mounting-

-Then Vader took two steps back, raised his hand, and blue lightning exploded in Hett's face. He tried to lower his weapons to block the attack but the pain was excruciating. He felt as though his skin was being flailed from his flesh, like his hair was on fire, like skull was being boiled from the inside.

Vader stepped forward, close enough to wrap the black glove of his hand around Hett's head.

Somehow, though the awful world-shattering pain, he heard Darth Vader rasp, "You are no Jedi, A'Sharad Hett, and you are not a Sith yet. Right now you are *nothing*."

And, through all that pain, he understood that it was true. He could never kill Anakin Skywalker because he'd missed his chance. Anakin was already dead. Darth Vader had replaced him and Vader was harder, stronger, *better* than Anakin.

He was certainly better than A'Sharad Hett.

There was one last burst of agony as Vader threw him off the ice. The pain of freezing water replaced the pain of blue lightning as the current carried him fast away from the ice, toward the great waterfall that tumbled to the plain far below.

He flailed his arms and kicked his legs. For a moment his head bobbed over the water; he drew a full breath of air and saw Darth Vader with his back already turned and his lightsaber shut off.

Hett clung tight to both lightsabers even as he plunged over the edge.

29

"When we soared away from Theed I breathed a sigh of relief. Our escape had been so unlikely, so incredible, that it just seemed wrong for anything else to try and get in our way. I thought all we had left to do was jump to hyperspace, then get to mourning our considerable losses. I was over-confident. I didn't expect that there was still one more loss: the final one, the hardest."

The operation on Naboo had gone so smoothly that Octavian Grant was, frankly, suspicious.

He certainly didn't *mind* the fact that, so far, all he and *Majesty* and the other ships had done was sit in orbit over the planet and listen to reports of the 501st securing one enemy location after another. When word came down that Queen Apailana had been killed by a sniper, it seemed like everything really *was* over.

A short while later, the comm officer reported a call from Lord Vader. It was bound to come some time, and Grant felt weirdly relieved as he walked over to the comm station.

The Dark Lord's blue holo appeared over the console. Before Grant could offer any congratulations for his victory, Vader snapped, "Admiral, two ships have just escaped Theed. Do not let them escape to hyperspace."

"Understood, sir. I'll send our fighter screens after them."

"They must not escape and they must *not* be destroyed," Vader said. "Is that clear? I must kill them with my own hands."

Grant fought a frown and said, "Of course, Lord Vader. We will capture them and-"

"Hold them in a tractor beam but do *not* bring them aboard. I won't trust the subjugation of Jedi to your crew. I will handle them *myself*."

"Yes, sir. We will reel them in but refrain from bringing them aboard."

"And do *not* destroy them." Vader repeated.

"Of course, sir."

The holo turned off without warning. Grant looked behind him and saw Griff hovering over his shoulder.

"You heard the man," Grant said. "Tell all fighters to start herding those ships. Send them our way. We should be able to intercept and hold them in a tractor beam until Lord Vader arrives."

"Of course," Griff nodded. He gave the order quickly, then turned back to the admiral. "Sir, I missed the beginning. Did Lord Vader say *why* he wanted them captured?"

"So he could kill them *himself* apparently," Grant sighed. Whatever mission he went on next, he prayed it would be bereft of Force-users.

* * *

The moment we reached Naboo's upper atmosphere, those howling TIE fighters were on us. Green lasers flashed on all sides. I swore, yet again wished Sacha was with us, and tried to outmaneuver them, but I'm almost as bad a pilot as I am a sharpshooter. Jax and I-Five did a better job in *Laranth*, but there were so damn many of them it was impossible to slip away. There must have been three full squads of TIEs for our two little ships.

The moment I realized that, I realized we should have been dead.

I fired up the short-range comm and called *Laranth*. "Hey guys," I said, "Why aren't we dead?"

"They've only winged us over here," Jax said. "They haven't even broken our shields."

"They're not shooting to kill," I-Five said. "They're trying to herd us."

"But where?" I asked.

"There!" Scout answered, jabbing a finger out the viewport. *Laranth* dipped slightly and I could see, beyond the red corona of her engines, the diamond-shaped face of a star destroyer up ahead.

"Oh *no*," I groaned. "We have to do something!"

"Like what?" Jax sounded frustrated, helpless. "They're too many fighters to break away."

Five said, "You're smaller, Den. You might be able to make a run for it."

"No! No, I am *not* leaving you guys-"

"Vader wants me," Jax said. "And I-Five, and Thracia. You guys-"

"We don't matter," Scout said gravely.

A flash of green lasers rattled our engines, driving home the point. That destroyer surged closer and closer and I realized it wasn't the typical vicstar or Venator. It was smaller, with its hangar located at the front of the ship like a mouth.

As if reading my thought across space, I-Five said, "That's one of those new *Gladiator*-class ships. Smaller and quicker than the other ones. They might catch us even if we ran."

"This isn't fair!" I pounded the console until my hand hurt. "There has to be something we can do! Anything!"

I felt the shuttle shudder around us as the tractor beam locked on. Another beam grabbed *Laranth* and began reeling us in toward the ship's big gaping maw.

I had to look away. Scout, though, kept staring straight ahead. I reached down, took her hand, squeezed it.

Then both ships stopped.

We just hung there, maybe two hundred meters in front of that big open landing bay. Our engines were still running but we went nowhere. We couldn't do anything.

"Guys," I said into the comm, "What the hell is going on now?"

"They're not taking us in," Five said, "They're just *holding* us here."

"I can tell that. But why?"

The line went silent except for a low, ominous buzz of static.

When Jax finally spoke, his voice was soaked in fear. "They're waiting for Vader. He's coming."

* * *

Jax could sense him, far below, just leaving Theed now but simmering with anger and determination. This was different from all the other times he'd faced Vader; this time the man who'd been Anakin Skywalker was really, truly determined to kill him with his own hand.

And, as he sat there in the cockpit with I-Five and Thracia, an idea pierced through his dread, strong and clear.

Without explanation, he threw himself out of his seat and raced for his personal quarters. When he got there he fell on his knees and grabbed the ship's vacuum suit, the one that A'Sharad Hett had worn during the mission to Prakith and finally discarded here after the Battle of Sarillion.

Jax pulled it out, unfolded it, looked it over-
-and saw the long scorched tear along the upper chest.

He fell down to his knees again. Hope died just as fast as it had come. There was nothing he could do, nothing.

Vader was minutes away and this time there'd be no escape, not for Den or I-Five, not for Thracia or Scout...

I-Five said softly, "What were you trying to do, Jax?"

He looked around and saw both I-Five and Thracia behind him. He held up the vac suit and said, "I thought I could spacejump. Get to the ship's hull, kill the tractor beam with my lightsaber. Then you all could go."

"That'd be suicide," I-Five said.

Jax nodded and tossed the torn suit to the deck. "I can't do it anyway."

"Can you sense Vader coming?" Thracia asked.

"Can't you?"

"I was not as... important to Anakin as you. But I feel a menace getting closer."

No one said anything. All they could do was wait. Jax stared at Laranth's miisai tree, still ugly and gnarled and well-preserved in its nutrient plot. He tried to imagine what she would have done in this situation, how she would have faced Vader in her last moments.

But he realized that didn't matter. It wasn't dying that horrified him; he'd been slowly bracing himself for that since Order 66. It was the thought of Five and Thracia, Den and Scout, dying too, at the hands of Vader no less, that was simply intolerable.

Then I-Five said, "I can do it."

Jax stared. So did Thracia.

"I *can*," Five repeated. "The vacuum might tear off my synth-flesh but my core systems can handle it, at least long enough to blow that tractor beam emitter."

Jax lurched to his feet. "I-Five, no. You can't. You're--"

The droid smiled. "Whatever else I am, I'm still I-Five. I'll protect you, Jax. Like I always have."

"Five, no. You can't sacrifice yourself for me."

Not after Magash, Sacha, Ash, Altis, Kina Ha. It was already too many.

His smile turned sad. "It's what I do, Jax."

Jax looked into those mechanical eyes, felt him in the Force. Right then the droid seemed more human than any sentient being he'd ever known.

Jax wrapped his arms around him in a tight hug and whispered in his ear, "My turn, Five."

Then his hand dropped to the manual power switch at I-Five's back and shut him off.

The droid immediately sagged against him. Jax lowered the mechanical body and looked at Thracia.

"You can do it, can't you? You can transfer my essence to his, like Lath Melray did?"

The old woman blinked. "Jax... I... I've never done it before."

"I could *feel* it, when you bridged our minds before. I felt like my soul was slipping into that droid body. You can transfer us. I know you can. Besides, we have nothing to lose. *Nothing*."

"There's no way of knowing what will happen, or how long it will take for-"

"Then we have to start now!" Jax squeezed her hand. "Please! We *have* to do this! Now!"

She stared at him and he stared at her and the silence seemed to yawn forever between them as she felt his thoughts and he felt hers.

But forever lasted a moment. She sat down between Jax and I-Five's prone body and asked, "Are you *sure*, Jax? Really sure?"

"What kind of Jedi am I if I let my friends die for me?"

She nodded. He closed his eyes and felt her hand press against his forehead.

It came like it had before, only faster. I-Five's Force presence exploded brightly in his awareness, and with it came a rush of images. He saw his father, the black-robed Sith with the double-bladed lightsaber. He saw Laranth and Kajin Savaros and Deeja and Rhinann, Pol Haus and Sheel Mafeen and Tuden Sal. He saw the clutter of a mechanical workshop, felt his own soft green Nemoidian hand slip affectionately across the chassis of a brand-new 5YQ protocol droid.

And then he felt the surge of a great flood that swept it all away.

After the flood was darkness.

And, in all that darkness, one tiny pinpoint of light. It seemed so far away; he tried to move his limbs but they were too heavy. He tried to open his mouth but it made no sound. He tried to remember something beyond the dark but he found nothing, could believe nothing, not even the light.

Then a voice said, "*Come*."

The voice came from the light. It was a voice he knew.

It said again, "*Come*."

The voice carried memory with it. An old woman, a body so close to human lying prone on the floor, a man with sad eyes and such a determined face.

He opened his eyes. Light washed the dark away and he saw that face, eyes now closed, cheek pressed against the floor.

He was lying on the floor too. He pushed himself upright with both hands. His body felt heavy. Everything felt heavy, stiff. It felt foreign.

He turned his head. The old woman was there. Her wrinkled face shone with sweat; she was breathing hard.

"Do you know who you are?" she asked.

He looked at the human lying on the floor. His breathing was regular; his eyelids twitched. He had a lightsaber hooked to his belt.

"This is mine," he said. He reached over and took the lightsaber. "I'm a Jedi."

The old woman nodded sadly. "You certainly are. Do you know your name?"

He looked down at that weapon, ran his hands over it. It was familiar and foreign at the same time. He knew all its dents and contours but it felt like he was holding it for the first time.

"Do you know your name?" she repeated.

It came to him from nowhere. "Jax Pavan."

She nodded. "Do you know what you have to do?"

He looked down at the human body on the floor. It twitched; the man rolled onto his back. His eyes fluttered open, then closed again. His lips made wordless noises.

"I suppose his new flesh is weaker than yours," the woman said. "He may have a harder time remembering than you. Or not. I can't say."

He looked around the rest of the room. He saw the torn-open vac suit. He saw the miisai plant, sitting in its place of reverence, and when he saw the tree he remembered all his dead, and the resolve that no one would ever die for him again.

"I know what I have to do," Jax said.

* * *

I anxiously looked at the shuttle scanners, which were definitely not on par with the equipment on *Laranth* but enough to tell us

that, yes, we were still suspended in front of a star destroyer's mouth, we were still surrounded by swarms of TIE fighters, and finally, that a shuttle had just exited Naboo's upper atmosphere and was heading right towards us.

"This is it," I muttered. I was still holding Scout's hand.

She squeezed a little harder and nodded. There didn't seem much to say when you were waiting for your doom.

Then I-Five's voice said over the comlink, "Den, Scout, get ready to fire your engines!"

"Five?" I pulled my hand out of hers. "What's happening?"

There was a pause. Then he said, "This is Jax, Den."

"What? You're not Jax, you're I-Five! Did something scramble your brain? Hey, Jax, what's going on? Are you there? Thracia? Anyone?"

"Just get ready, Den," the voice said. "And Den... thanks for everything. You too, Scout"

"What? Jax- Five- what are you-"

The comlink went off. I swore and hit the panel.

"Look!" Scout pointed at *Laranth* hanging in front of us. "The airlock's opening!"

I peered forward and saw some body flush out into the void. My gut fell into my chair; I had no words, not even swears, for the sight of I-Five's droid body, naked against the vacuum, shooting fast toward the mouth of the star destroyer's hangar.

* * *

The vacuum tore at Jax Pavan's flesh, peeling off his clothes and synth-skin and exposing his metal frame to coldness of space. For the first few seconds it was agony; then the synth-skin was gone and tactile sensors with it.

Then he was just naked metal, a whirring processor, and a soul trapped somewhere inside. It was a stunning new existence, impossible to capture in words. He wished he had the time to explore it.

But the hull of the destroyer was racing up to meet him. He stretched out all four limbs in front of him as the hangar mouth and tractor beam emitter filled his vision. Metal impacted on metal but he didn't feel pain. He didn't feel anything at all except the hum of distant minds in the Force.

He felt Thracia, watching from *Laranth's* cockpit, and the man he'd called I-Five struggling to consciousness in his new body. He felt Scout's awed realization and Den's stubborn confusion.

He felt Darth Vader, somewhere in the black distance but getting so close, and Darth Vader felt him. For a moment their minds touched. He felt Darth Vader's grim resolve, not to be free of his links to the past, but to violently sever them and stoke the hot fires that even now forged him into a greater and greater Sith Lord. He savored the pain that love brought.

It seemed a poor way for a life to end up. Jax felt very, very sad for Anakin Skywalker. He tried to pass that feeling on to Vader through the void. He wasn't sure if he succeeded. There wasn't time to find out.

In his right hand he clenched his lightsaber. He thumbed the button. Green light lanced out into space. His joints, freezing in the vacuum, strained as he shifted his grip and angled that lance at the tractor beam emitter.

He could no longer close his eyes, but he paused for one second, thought of *Laranth* and then his father. Then he plunged his blade into the emitter and blew the universe away.

* * *

As the explosion rocked the mouth of the destroyer's hangar, our shuttle jerked free of the tractor beam. So did *Laranth*.

I still had absolutely no idea what had just happened but I quickly punched the engines. *Laranth* leaped forward too and together we raced low over the destroyer's shields. For a second the TIE fighters just hung there at the hangar mouth, like they had no idea what they were supposed to do. By the time they gave chase

we'd already cleared the destroyer and were about ready to exit the planet's gravity well.

"Scout, get us a hyperspace route!" I said.

"Already got one," she said. "I hope you like Umgul."

"Sure, why not?" I punched the comlink on and called, "*Laranth*, are you ready to jump? Anyone, are you there?"

I had absolutely no idea what I was going to get. For a second it was just static. Then I heard a voice, *Jax's* voice, muffled and disoriented, saying, "I'm okay. We have this, we have-"

"Jax!" I shouted, "We've got a course! Meet us at-"

"I'm not... I think I-"

And then *Laranth* winked away.

I stared, just stared at the blank starfield where they'd been.

Beside me, Scout softly moaned, "Oh, Jax..."

Lasers flashed past us. The fighters were coming up fast. There was nothing we could do, no way we could track *Laranth* and whoever was left aboard.

We could only save ourselves.

I punched the throttle and flung us into hyperspace. Its blue-white blur surrounded us, embraced us, but couldn't fill the loss inside.

"How do you trace someone after a random jump to hyperspace? You can't. You can't even know that he didn't leap into a supernova and burn up. We did all we could to scour nearby sectors for a ship of Laranth's description, but nothing turned up. Imagine not knowing if your best friend is alive or dead. Then imagine living with that emptiness, that helplessness. Now imagine living with it for thirty years."

When Darth Vader returned to the planet, the sun was coming up over Theed. Crisp morning light gave testament to all the scars the city had gained over the past night. Palace Plaza was still filled with ash and debris. The steps to the palace itself were laden with the bodies of dead RSF officers, though the Imperial bodies had already been carried away.

The rest of the city was not as badly damaged, though some damage remained: the great hole blown through the side of the hangar, the broken pillar at the base of Padmé Amidala's mausoleum.

After his shuttle set down at that far end of the plaza, Darth Vader stepped down its landing ramp to see the mausoleum looming in front of him. It called him, still. He didn't know what he could do in there. There was no purpose in seeing Padmé's coffin again. Still, a part of him wanted to go, to be with her, to remember.

It was too tempting. He'd come here to break with the past. If he clung to Padmé's coffin he might as well crawl back to Tatooine and weep at his mother's grave. The past could not be escaped, but if he refused to let it go he'd be as pathetic as A'Sharad Hett. Naboo had been enough; he would not be going back to the desert too.

He turned away and marched toward the palace. As he neared the steps, Colonel Panaka marched up to meet him.

Panaka snapped a salute and said, "I'm glad you're here, Lord Vader."

Vader said nothing in response. He stared down Panaka, at the bags under his eyes and gray stubble on his cheeks. He looked so old, so tired.

"What has been done with the queen's body?" Vader asked.

"At the moment it's being preserved inside the palace. What do you recommend doing with it?"

"Burn it secretly," he said. "There is to be no funeral ceremony, no public mourning. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you selected a replacement for Apanaka?"

"We've found a young lady in the Legislative Youth Program who is... amenable, my Lord."

"Excellent."

"My Lord, several of the Queen's counselors are still being held prisoner, as per your orders. Sola Naberrié and Sio Bibble."

"Take me to them, Colonel."

Panaka nodded and led Vader through a clear path up on the stairs and into the palace. The colonel started to explain the general layout of the building but Vader paid him no attention; he already knew it well.

It was his first time being here as Darth Vader instead of Anakin, and he should have felt something about that, but he didn't. Since the death of Jax Pavan he felt hollow inside. It had taken a long time to understand his own reasons for chasing Pavan, and once he finally had, the chance to deliver the final blow had been stolen from him by one last act of Jedi bravery.

He still remembered the last sensation he'd picked from Pavan's mind before his death. It had been *pity*. Pity for the Dark Lord of the Sith.

It was not the ending he'd needed. He felt empty and unfulfilled. He wondered if that would ever change.

Panaka showed him into one of the palace's many ornate meetings rooms, where Sola and Sio Bibble were bound and watched over by four 501st commandos.

They were a hapless pair. Sio Bibble was old and dirty and tired. And Sola...

When he'd met her long ago, on his first trip to Naboo after ten years, Sola had immediately struck him as an older, more careworn version of Padmé. It wasn't just the physical resemblance; she'd had Padmé's curiosity and her ideals, but at the same time they'd been weathered by experience and responsibility. Rather than being pre-occupied with the convulsions of galactic politics her concerns were closer to home: Naboo, her sister, her husband and infant daughters. Anakin had seen in her something of the future he'd wanted for himself.

Now that woman stared at him with utter revulsion.

"Good morning, Counselors," he said.

Sola cringed. Bibble sneered, "This won't work, Vader. Your master should have known that. You invade our planet, you kill our queen, and what will it get you? Do you think you've beaten us into submission? Nute Gunray thought that too. Look how it turned out for him."

Vader had killed Gunray. He'd been one of the first. There'd been many bodies since then; it seemed a long time ago.

"A replacement has been selected for Queen Apailana," he said. "She will remain in that position until we say otherwise."

"Of course. So much for democracy." Bibble shifted his glare to Panaka. "I hope you're proud of yourself, Colonel. Do you remember how brave you were, defending Queen Amidala from the Trade Federation? If she saw you now she would *vomit*."

"I served Naboo, not the queen," the colonel said stiffly. "And frankly, Counselor, Amidala brought invasion on her head with her own naivety. And so did Apailana."

"She loved Padmé," Sola said quietly. "Apailana did."

"So much she chased the same fate." Panaka shook his head. "Naboo's always needed less idealism and more wisdom."

"Is that what we have now?" Bibble looked at Vader. "*Wisdom?*"

Vader took two steps toward the old man. "You have what the Empire has given you. Your life. You should be satisfied with that."

"Some gift," Bibble laughed bitterly. "I wish I'd never lived to see this."

The old man was getting tiresome. He'd passed beyond fear and gotten reckless, but when Vader looked at Sola, he still saw the desire to live.

"What of you, Counselor Naberrié?" He asked.

She blinked eyes just like Padmé's. "I... want to live."

"Why?"

She blinked again. "Lord Vader... I have a family... A husband... children."

He remembered what A'Sharad Hett had told him in the mausoleum, the oath he'd sworn to destroy Vader and his descendants. At the time he'd dismissed it as the ravings of a man gone mad with grief. Now he allowed himself to wonder if maybe, just maybe, Padmé had survived long enough to bear a child after all.

Vader placed a hand on the hilt of his lightsaber. "You care for your family, don't you?"

"Of course I care." Her voice trembled. One tear ran down her cheek. "I *love* them."

"And your dear sister? Did you love her as well?"

"More than anything." She sniffed. "I still do."

"And your sister... did *she* have children?"

He saw the confusion on her face, felt it in the Force. It faded quickly into sadness. "Padmé died before she could give birth."

He leaned close, stared at those eyes (so like Padmé's) and probed her with the Force. He sensed no deception, only deep pain and some curiosity.

Sola's brows drew together and she asked, "Who are you?"

Vader stared. He didn't back away.

"Who *are* you?" she asked again. "Did you... know Padmé?"

Something softened in her eyes. For a moment he sensed concern, even sympathy.

It was too much.

His lightsaber sprung to life in his hand. The woman ducked her head low, like that would help. It didn't matter anyway; Vader swung his blade over her head and right through Sio Bibble's neck.

The old man's head went rolling to the corner of the room. His body swayed on its feet before crumpling to the ground.

Sola screamed until she was too weak to stand. She fell to her knees and looked up at him. That face- Padmé's face- was red with grief and anger.

"Why?" she screamed. "Why did you do that? *Why?*"

When he gave no answer, she started to cry. He stared down that face, tried to memorize its lines and creases and the absolute hatred in those eyes. If he clung to it, in time it would replace the memory of love in Padmé's.

Once it did, that hatred would always be with him, burning him, forging him into something greater.

Vader hooked his lightsaber to his belt. He turned to Colonel Panaka, staring wide-eyed and slack-jawed at Bibble's headless corpse.

"Colonel," he said.

Panaka blinked, shifted his eyes to Vader.

"See to it that Counselor Naberrié is released to her family unharmed."

Panaka frowned, uncomprehending, but he nodded. "Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

He turned his back on Panaka's blank stare, Sola's whimpered crying. He walked out of the palace, across the plaza, and back to his shuttle.

When it lifted off he didn't spare Theed one more look. It was all behind him, purged of nostalgia's temptation. His shuttle soared through the clouds and out of the atmosphere and through space as black as his armor, as cold as the heart beneath it.

* * *

Admiral Octavian Grant stood behind his family's hand-carved wooden desk, his back to Farstine's dusty sphere as it slowly rotated beyond the viewport, and watched the hologram shine to life in front of him.

This time, he didn't salute.

"Grand Moff Tarkin," he said, "It's a pleasure to hear from you again."

Tarkin looked the same as ever. His skull-like head tilted in a slight nod and he said, "I wanted to congratulate you personally on your promotion, Admiral. And to inform you of your next assignment."

Grant stiffened slightly. He'd expected it to come from Screed, or even the Emperor himself.

"As you know," Tarkin went on, "There have been unsettling developments in the Western Reaches. I have finally convinced Imperial Center to give me the resources needed to stamp out these annoyances once and for all."

Grant had half-expected that. Now that Syne was defeated the Empire needed new enemies to squash. He found himself flush with excitement over the thought of new battles, new challenges.

Tarkin continued, "The Emperor, in his wisdom, has seen fit to give Terrinald Screen direct leadership over the campaign. Therefore, he will be relocating his command to the Outer Rim sectors."

Grant frowned. "Then who will command the Home Fleet?"

"It has been decided that the honor will be yours, Admiral." Tarkin smiled politely, but like everything Tarkin, it came off as vaguely predatory.

All Grant could say was, "I see."

"You should be congratulated, Admiral. Command of the Home Fleet is a very coveted position."

"Am I to relocate to Anaxes immediately?"

"Those are your orders, Admiral."

One hand reached down and pressed against the polished grains of his desk. "I will have to make arrangements first. Relocate supplies. And so forth."

"Of course. You will be given standard preparation time. I thought you also might like to know that your Captain Griff will now be in command of the Ryndellian sector fleet. He's been given the new rank of commodore."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"I've already contacted him directly to inform him of his promotion," Tarkin said, "Though of course, you're free to congratulate him yourself."

Grant nodded dumbly.

"And may I pass my personal congratulations to you too, Admiral. I wish you great success in your new position."

"Thank you, Grant Moff. And good luck in your new campaign."

Tarkin nodded. "I'm sure we'll speak again, Admiral. But for now, goodbye."

And just like that, the holo flickered off.

All of Grant's energy evaporated. He dropped into his chair and stared at his desk. He felt empty inside, uncertain of how to feel.

An appointment to Anaxes was a blessing. Defending Coruscant and the Core was a prestigious position. It brought him close to the center of political power and gave him close access to the most important beings in galaxy. In that sense, it was as far from Farstine as could be.

It was also a curse. He'd embraced the Judicials' transformation into a fighting force because he wanted to bring order and prove himself. Battling the likes of Marath Voro, Slayke, and the Syne family had given him the chance to do just that. There would be no battles to fight in the Core, just drills to run and resources to

shuffle. He could end up nothing more than a glorified quartermaster.

He wondered if he might end up like Screed, sitting bored in his posh penthouse, enriching himself by whatever means possible while others went off, fought, and died.

Well, Screed was going to go back to fighting soon. Grant wondered whether corruption had dulled the man's once-brilliant tactical mind. He was sure it had stunted his bravery. Grant didn't want to follow that path, but felt afraid he would anyway.

He spun his chair away from his desk and stared down at the planet. He suddenly felt he would miss this world. Not the planet itself, not this station, not this quiet exile. He knew that once he got to Anaxes, he would miss the hours spent sitting in this room, looking down at Farstine, contemplating new ways to bring his enemies into line.

Marath Vooroo, Gregor Syne, little Jereveth Syne most of all, those were enemies a man could respect. They gave him purpose and a challenge.

As he watched the planet turn, he discovered that he missed them all.

* * *

Because he was ordered to, Jan Dodonna returned to Terrinald Screed's unfinished penthouse in Imperial City. When he got off the speeder taxi and onto the landing platform, he was surprised to find a gold-plated protocol droid there to greet him instead of the pale young Twi'lek.

The droid was certainly more polite and less leering than Boc, so he didn't much mind. It shuffled inside and showed Dodonna right back to the chair he'd left in disgust several days ago.

Screed was sitting in the opposite one, just like Dodonna had left him.

"Would you like anything to drink?" he asked as Dodonna sat.

"No thank you. I don't plan to stay long."

"Have other business do you?" Screed raised his one eyebrow.

"Not particularly, no."

Screed's features went cold. He waved a hand and told the protocol droid to go.

As he watched it shuffle out of the room, Dodonna asked, "What became of your servant Boc?"

"Taken from me," Screed snorted. "By High Inquisitor Jerec, of all people. It turns out Jerec lost his most trusted apprentices during the raid on Naboo. That means he needs new ones, and it turns out *Boc* was Force-sensitive. Can you believe that? I guess I should have sensed it. He was always a little too clever for a subhuman, too good at reading peoples' intentions..."

"What happened on Naboo?" Dodonna frowned. He hadn't heard anything about it, not on the HoloNet, not from anyone else in the military.

"You'll see it on the news soon. A Jedi cell attacked their capital and killed the queen. Thankfully, our brave troops intervened to put them down." Screed said with a mocking sneer. "Darth Vader was there himself, cutting down all those evil terrorists."

"What *really* happened?"

"It doesn't matter," Screed waved a hand. "There's more important things going on."

"Such as?" Dodonna said stiffly.

"I've received a new assignment. I am transferring my command to the Outer Rim to lead the pacification of the Western Reaches." Screed made it sound like a prison sentence.

"I've heard most of the unrest there is from criminal elements mixing with Separatist hold-outs," Dodonna said. "They sound less capable than Syne and Slayke."

"Oh, it shouldn't be that difficult. Tarkin has been kicking up a fuss and the Emperor wants to keep him happy, so he's sending his best to put down the rebels." Screed leaned forward a little. "Come with me, Jan."

Dodonna shifted uneasily, looked away. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why not? You hate it on N'zoth. It's obvious. I don't blame you either. Keeping those Yevetha in line is a nasty job for anyone."

"It's not that."

"Then what? I could use you, Jan. We could end this campaign all the quicker." He softened his tone and added, "It would be like old times, wouldn't it? I might even be able to pull Adar back into it. Imagine, the three of us, together again."

The campaigns Dodonna had fought alongside Screed and Tallon had been fierce, brutal fights against the Separatists' best. Yet, somehow, he felt a certain nostalgia for them. At least then he'd known who was friend and who was enemy. He'd had comrades he could trust.

But that was a long time gone, and it wasn't coming back.

He shifted his gaze back to Screed, held both eyes, and asked, "Terrinald, where did you get the money for this place?"

Screed's face darkened. "Excuse me?"

"I've heard you have a penthouse on Anaxes almost as fine. You can't buy all this on a military salary, even yours."

"How did you hear that?"

"I've been asking a few discreet questions since our last meeting."

"If you've been poking around, why ask me?" Screed said coldly. "Apparently you've already heard enough rumors to make up your mind."

"Because I want to hear it from you, Terrinald. Tell me you're not embezzling money from the government. Tell me you didn't get your Twi'lek 'servant' from a Ryloth slaver."

"You even checked up on Boc, did you?"

"I just... heard things. But I owed it to you, Terrinald, after all we've been through, to get your story. So please, tell me they aren't true. Tell me something, anything."

Dodonna's voice had started trembling. He stared at the face across the table and found it more strange than familiar.

Eventually Screed said, "What's the point? You've made up your mind."

He wasn't even going to try and deny it. Dodonna didn't feel angry, just empty, more empty than he could ever remember.

"Why?" Dodonna breathed. "Just... why?"

"You have to ask me that?" Screed snarled.

"Of course I do! I don't understand how... how..." He faltered, couldn't say it. He honestly couldn't understand how Terrinald Screed, the face of duty and devotion, could have fallen so far.

"I'm just taking what I *deserve*." Screed said.

Dodonna hadn't expected that. "What does that mean? You're already a high admiral. You're one of the most decorated, most respected men in the *galaxy*. What else do you want?"

"Respect?" Screed laughed bitterly. "What good is respect? *Look* at me, Jan! Look at this face, this broken body. I gave up everything for the Republic, then the Empire, for service and duty and all those big, lofty, *stupid* words." He pounded a fist on his metal chest. "*This* is what I am now. So yes, Jan, I deserved more. I took it."

It took Dodonna a long time to figure out what to say. "I know this hasn't been easy for you. But we knew this, when we signed on for the careers we did. We knew what could happen and we accepted that, because we were part of something greater."

"The Republic?" Screed shook his head. "The Republic was a diseased animal, and this new Empire..."

He trailed off. Dodonna pressed, "What about the Empire? Tell me, please."

"Look at Palpatine. Look at all he's done. Do you think that man really deserves our service?"

"No," Dodonna said. He settled back in his chair and felt all the weight lift from his body. It was what he'd come here planning to say; it felt strange and unreal for Screed to be the one to say it.

"This New Order is just as hollow as the Republic. Only now, Jan, we're not young. We're not stupid. Service is *not* its own reward. We have to take that ourselves."

Dodonna stared down at the table. He felt like every-thing was through, complete. There was only one more thing to say.

Screed held out a hand. "Come with me to the Western Reaches, Jan. We can get what we deserve, even there."

Dodonna looked at that hand stretched before him, bony and old before its time, trembling lightly with Screed's agues. Instead of

taking it he reached for his chest, plucked the general's rank badge off his uniform, and tossed it on the table.

Screed lowered his hand. "What is this? What are you doing?"

Dodonna took off his rank cylinders and put them down too. "It's over, Terrinald. It's done. I'm resigning."

"What? What do you think you're *doing*?"

"I just told you. I'm leaving Imperial service effective immediately."

"You *can't*."

Dodonna stood up from his chair. "I just did. Because you're right. The New Order isn't worth serving."

Screed staggered to his feet. "What do you think you're going to do now? You've been an officer all your life."

"I haven't thought that far ahead."

"But you *can't*!" Screed repeated stubbornly.

"It's over," Dodonna said firmly. "To be honest, I made up my mind already. I submitted my formal resignation just before coming here."

Trembling, Screed braced himself on the arm of his chair.

"You're making a mistake, Jan. You're throwing away everything."

Dodonna looked sadly into Screed's eyes and said, "There's nothing to throw away."

He turned and walked out of the room without looking back. When he stepped outside the wind tousled his hair and stung his cheeks. Dodonna felt empty but free. Some-how, he found the strength to smile.

* * *

Nighttime in the desert.

It was a deeper dark than anything save the blackness of space. When the wind blew, it was dry and bone-chilling.

The sandy plain swept into invisible forever. The stars overhead were myriad. If he stared up at them long enough it felt like his body and left the ground and he was floating weightless in the endless expanse of the universe.

But A'Sharad Hett knew that, sooner or later, twin suns would crest the horizon and burn the Tatooine sand with their scorching light.

He stood with both lightsabers in his hand: his own in his left, his father's in his right. He'd clung to them, even as he'd plunged off the waterfall on Naboo, even as he'd summoned the Force at the very last second to soften his impact in the icy river far, far below.

For a long time after that he'd just laid there on the cold snowy riverbank, staring at all those stars, wondering what else he could do, where he could possibly go. In the wake of Syne's death he'd clung to the idea of killing Anakin Skywalker and all his descendants, because that fulfilled his need for purpose and revenge.

He understood now that he was already too late to kill Anakin Skywalker; Darth Vader had done that, and Vader was beyond his ability to kill. As for Anakin's descendants, it seemed that even Vader himself was unaware of them. If they existed at all, they would be impossible to find.

He wasn't even sure if the Force wanted him to do that any more.

So, adrift and without purpose, he'd come back to Tatooine, like a dying animal returning to its nest.

He'd taken a landspeeder out to Achorhead, and when night fell, he'd simply walked off into the desert. There was no light except from stars, no sign of life at all. He felt like he could stay in this nothing forever.

But he knew those suns would rise, the planet would turn, and life would go on. He stared down at his weapons, glinting faintly in starlight. He's clung to his last relic of his father for all his life, and in the end it had gotten him nothing. Sometimes he felt like his father, his memory and his weapon, had been guiding him all his life, taking him through a broad circle only to end at the same place where he'd began.

Maybe it was better to bury the lightsaber, and the past.

Hett crouched low over the sand. He placed his weapons on the ground and dug a pit with his hands. He clapped the sand off his palm and picked up the lightsabers again.

He thought then that if he buried them, he would leave everything else behind too: Sharad Hett, Syne, all the Skywalkers. All the dead who'd brought him through a circle where nothing had been gained.

Then, in the distance, he heard a sound.

Even after so many years, he knew the battle cry of a clan of Tusken. He stood up and spun around searching for the source of the noise. At first all he saw was the flat horizon-line of an endless desert. Then he heard the sound of firing blasters, saw their flash of light in the far eastern distance.

Only outlanders used those weapons.

It seemed that, after all this time, his home had not changed either. Outland settlers still stole Tusken land like it was theirs to rule, the Tuskens defended themselves, and the settlers responded with devastating force.

His father had lived and died protecting his people from the outlanders.

Hett looked down at the lightsabers, still in his hands. He may have failed in all else, but what his father had once done, he could do now.

Perhaps he'd come full circle just to do what he should have from the start.

Hett kicked the sand beneath him, filling the hole he'd dug. He stamped the ground flat. Then he walked across the desert toward the promise of violence and a new day.

EPILOGUE: Daybreak

The tale was told, the story complete. All three of them stared downward at the table; it seemed hard to look into each other's eyes.

"Thirty years," the man said, echoing Den Dhur's final words. "I can barely image thirty years."

"You're older than that," the woman said softly. "Your body, anyway."

He shifted, looked at her. He examined her chin, her cheeks, her hair, everything but her eyes. "You're Scout, aren't you?"

"Nowadays I usually go by Officer Esterhazy." Her smile was sad. "Nobody's called me Scout in thirty years. Nobody except Den, anyway."

Somehow he couldn't bear to look at the Sullustan. "And have you and Den been together, all that time?"

"Not all of it," Den said. "We split up for a while, trying to find *Laranth*. And afterwards, well, we both found things to keep us busy."

"You're... a medical officer? A doctor?"

Scout- he couldn't think of her by another name- nodded. "I tried to take after someone I admired."

"But you were... *are* a Jedi."

She kept smiling, still sadly. "Like Djinn used to say, Jedi is something you *do*. For me, it's been about helping people. It always has been. And that's what I've been doing, all this time, in my own way. Quietly. A lot of the time I don't even use the Force at all."

"Right under the Empire's nose for twenty years," Den said with gruff admiration.

"I was never strong enough for them to care," Scout said.

"But the Jedi are *back*," he man pressed. "Luke Skywalker, he's set up a whole new academy on Yavin 4. You should go to them. You should try and-"

"It's not for me," Scout shook her head.

"Did you go there? Did you see it for yourself?"

"No, and I don't have much to offer either."

"But you do! You lived through the old Order, you saw it fall! You know how to avoid the mistakes they made last time."

"Maybe. I made a lot of mistakes myself back then. But Skywalker's getting off on the right foot, I think."

"How do you know that?"

"He's letting his students love, marry, have families. He's letting them take part in real life, not locking them up in the Temple right after they're born." Her smile got a little warmer. "I know Djinn would have liked that."

For some reason, he still felt disappointed. "So you're just... staying here."

"I'm doing my job," she said.

The room fell into silence again. He mustered the strength to turn and look at the Sullustan. He almost flinched away when he saw those big black eyes, boring into him.

"What about you?" he asked. "You aren't with the police or CSF, are you?"

"No," Den admitted. "Believe it or not, I've started doing journalism again. Turns out it's a lot more fun now that the Empire's gone. My skills were a little rusty, though."

"Then what did you do for thirty years?"

Den stared at him, just stared. His body tightened with fear he couldn't explain. "Were you... looking for them?"

"For a long time." Den's voice was dry, heavy, sad. "But eventually, I pretty much convinced myself that there was nothing I could do. That I'd never know."

Silence again. They were staring at him; he wanted to get up and run out of the room but there was no place to go.

Then, softly, Scout asked, "Do you know what your name is?"

He felt like he was submerged under water, thrashed about by hard currents. "That's... a very hard question."

"What do people call you?" Den leaned forward.

He closed his eyes, like that would chase them away, but of course it didn't.

"Where were you born?" asked Scout. "Who were your parents?"

He felt cold tears run down his face. "You used to call me... I-Five."

The silence, the darkness, seemed to last forever. Then Den asked, "What else do you remember?"

"When you told that story... sometimes it felt so vivid it was like was remembering it myself. I could see the faces of people I never knew, places I'd never been. But Jax... I could never remember his face." With great effort, he opened his eyes and looked at them both. "It's my face, isn't it?"

Scout nodded. "What else do you remember?"

"I don't know!" He pounded the table with a fist. "These memories... They're not mine! I was... I *am* a private investigator. I've been working on Coruscant since the Empire was around, helping people..."

"What were you before then?"

"I.... I could never remember. I just... tried not to think about it."

"And when you did?" asked Den.

"I felt pain. Loss." He blinked away new tears. "I think I remember a little about Lath Melray. He was brilliant, strange... and so alone. But *I* was never alone. Not with you and Jax..."

He shuddered. He looked at his hands. They were worn pink human hands, but somehow he was expecting them to be burnished metal or smooth green flesh.

"Do you want to remember more?" Scout asked.

He didn't answer. He couldn't. He felt like everything he knew, everything he'd done, everything he'd even thought was about to be washed away.

Then he understood that it was already gone.

He gave a short, jagged nod. Scout reached out and placed a hand on the top of his head. She closed her eyes, took a breath, and—he remembered *everything*.

The next thing he knew his face was pressed against the cool metal tabletop. His skin tingled with cold sweat, his hands were shaking. His chest heaved with fast deep breaths.

His lips, suddenly dry, whispered, "My turn."

"What is that?" the woman asked.

Painfully, he tried to sit upright again. He looked at Scout, then at Den, like he was seeing them for the first time. Their faces seemed so *layered*, now, half-buried by thirty years of trials and losses.

"Why did you say that?" Scout asked again. "*My turn*."

He shuddered. "Jax told me that. Right before he... before we..."

Scout got that bittersweet smile again. "Thracia said he whispered something to you, right before he shut down your droid body. I always wondered what it was."

"Thracia," he repeated.

"Do you remember her?" asked Den. "The old woman?"

"I remember Naboo, and what she did for us there... And afterward..."

"What happened when you woke up?" asked Scout. "Were you confused?"

"I didn't remember anything. I didn't know who I was." He stared down at his hands and tried to remember the first time he'd seen them that way. "Thracia... She was there with me. She was so *exhausted*, but she said we had to flee. And I went up to the cockpit... I didn't know what I was doing."

"We tried to call you," Den said. "I had no idea what was going on, but Scout, she had the Force, so she sort of knew."

"I panicked. Jumped us to hyperspace without even looking where we were going." He swallowed. "We were lucky it didn't kill us."

"What happened after that?"

"We landed on... a planet... No, a space station. And this woman, she said she wanted to help me, give me back my memories, but I was scared. I panicked. I ran. I got on a ship and left her."

"That's what she told me," said Scout.

"You found her, then?"

Scout hugged herself. "I was chasing rumors about this old woman who healed people and told fortunes in the Outer Rim. I eventually found her at Bimmieel. She was very old by then, but... I was there for the end. She told me what she could."

"I shouldn't have run." He kept staring at his hands. "I should have stayed with her, but I was scared... I was out of my mind. I didn't understand anything."

"Thracia gave us what we needed though," Den said. "She told us you stole away on a ship bound for Coruscant."

"She taught me how to unlock your memories too," Scout added.

"I wanted to go home," he said.

"I guess that should have been obvious," admitted Den, "But we'd been avoiding Coruscant. Aside from all those political reasons, it's pretty much the worst planet in the galaxy to try and find a single person."

"But you did." He looked up at them. "How long did it take?"

Scout took a breath and said, "Twenty years, give or take."

"Twenty years..."

"A lot of other stuff kept getting in the way too," Den reminded him.

"I know. I remember."

Palpatine's death, the fracturing of the Empire, the Krytos plague, the back-and-forth conquests that ravaged the planet before the New Republic finally took full control.

"We never gave up," Den's voice started to break. "And when we did find you, it seems so *obvious*. I mean, you, working in the mid-levels, as a private investigator..."

"Like Jax," he whispered. He squeezed his hands into fists, then relaxed them. "But after all this... I mean, I've lived, what, three lives now? Four? What *am* I?"

"Only you can answer that question," Scout said.

"No! That's not good enough!" He hit the table, but neither of them recoiled. "You people brought me here, gave me back these... memories."

"Would you have preferred we just let you shuffle on, not knowing what you really are?" Scout asked.

He didn't know. He had no answer. He felt bowed down by the weight of so many lives, so many responsibilities. He wanted to break down and cry.

He reached up with those worn pink hands, palmed wetness from his face. "I never used to be able to cry," he said. "That old HRD body, it could do a lot of things... but never cry."

"You're human now," Den said simply.

"I used to be so much more... I was a fripping *droid*!" His body shook with dry laughter. "I could be any droid I wanted, too! I could have lived forever. But this..."

"Being mortal's a pain sometimes," Den said. "You didn't have much choice about it in the end. Just like all of us."

"Choice," he repeated, and laughed again. It hurt his chest. "I was going to sacrifice myself. I was going to *die*, permanently. Forever. Just to save Jax."

"He saved you instead."

"I didn't ask him to do that."

"No. You didn't have to," Scout said. "Jax wanted to save people, and after losing Magash, Sacha, Ash and Djinn..."

"I know," he sniffed. "I know why he did it. It's just... All I ever wanted to do was save him. The way it ended..."

He lowered his face to his hands. Scout placed one warm hand on his shoulder-blades and said, "He gave you your life because he loved you. Just like you loved him. Attachment can be a weakness or a strength, just like anything else. It all depends on who you are and what you do with it."

"A droid and a Jedi," Den remarked. "Interesting kind of love."

"Droid, Jedi..." He picked his head out of his hands. "I've been both. But now... what *am* I?"

"A man," Den said.

"A man," he echoed. He let his hands fall into his palms, closed his eyes, breathed. He knew a man was all he'd ever be now. In a way it was a relief. "I feel so... so tired."

"As well you should. We've been at this all night."

"It feels like a lifetime. *Three* lifetimes. Or four, I don't even know anymore."

"Your long night's almost over," Scout squeezed his shoulder. "Do you want to see the sun come up?"

He opened his eyes. "Don't you have to... do something with me? I mean, this is a police station, they took me in, and..."

"I just called in some favors," Scout said. "Den and I thought this was the best way to handle you."

"You wanted to make sure I stayed put."

"More or less," admitted Den.

Their planned had worked, though he didn't need to tell them that. Den picked up his cane used it to push up from his chair. He said, "Come on. Let's get some air."

He rose to follow his friend as Den turned for the door. When he tried walking he almost fell; it was like he was using these legs for the first time. Scout took one shoulder and helped him out the door, into pale gray corridors now empty.

"Hey, Den," he asked, "What happened to your leg?"

The Sullustan chuckled. "It's been thirty years. You can't blame me for being a little worn down."

"I know. But what there anything... specific?"

Den sighed and said, "It's gonna be another long story."

"I have time," he said, "Plenty of it. As much as mere mortals get, anyway."

"That's good, 'cause I've got about the same."

"That means we're on the same level now?"

"Two lowly, mortal meat sacks. Disappointing huh?"

"Down this hall," Scout said, and led them toward a doorway.

It slid open. Cool wind rushed them, tickling his face and tousling his graying hair. He followed Scout and Den out onto the balcony.

The sun was coming up over Galactic City. High spires sparkled in the gold light and early morning speeder-traffic were like criss-crossing lines of jewels suspended in the air.

"Great view, isn't it," Scout flashed a smile. She looked young again.

He could only nod. He'd watched so many new days dawn on Coruscant, but right now, it was like he'd never seen it before.

Den put a hand on his arm and said, "Welcome home, friend."

About the Author

Gregory O. Scott is a pen name for fan fiction writer HandofThrawn45. When Disney rebooted the Expanded Universe in 2014, it brought about the official end of the Star Wars Legends continuity. Yet while no official Legends books have been released since the official end of the Legends line of books, not everyone has been willing to accept that it would seem. Since 2018, HandofThrawn45 has written a number of fan novels which are intended to close off the loose ends created in the wake of Disney's end of the Legends Continuity.

About the Type

This book was set in Minion, a 1990 Adobe Originals typeface by Robert Slimbach (b. 1956). Minion is inspired by classical, old-style typefaces of the late Renaissance, a period of elegant, beautiful, and highly readable type designs. Created primarily for text setting, Minion combines the aesthetic and functional qualities that make text type highly readable with the versatility of digital technology.